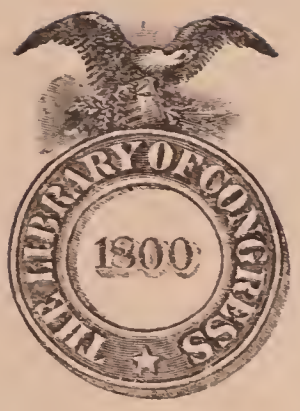
The Painted Woods

Nevil Henshaw



THE PAINTED WOODS

THE PAINTED WOODS

By

NEVIL HENSHAW

Author of

THE INHERITANCE OF JEAN TROUVE, ETC.

INDIANAPOLIS
THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

A short version of this novel, under the title *Jeanne of the Deep Swamp*, ran serially in OUTING during 1914 and 1915, and was copyrighted by the publishers of that periodical.

Printed in the United States of America

To

JACK AND BUN

CONTENTS

THE PAINTED WOODS

THE PAINTED WOODS

CHAPTER I

JEAN FAGOT

I JEAN LE BOSSU, first knew the Fagots amid that great stretch of forest which, in my own corner of Southwestern Louisiana, is called the Grand Woods.

At best it is lonesome among the trees. Those who live there are something more than neighbors.

At this time the Fagots numbered three. First there was Jean Fagot, the father, who was a wood-chopper by trade. Then came a son and a daughter. The mother I knew only through the talk of the family. A woman of Spanish extraction, she had died upon the occasion of the daughter's birth.

During the time that he was in the woods, Fagot and I became fast friends. Our huts were not far apart, and often in the long winter evenings we would visit each other. Thus I came to see much of Fagot that one less intimate would have missed. He was a small mild man, with a great shock of stiff bristly hair, and one of those deep rumbling voices that are often so strangely bestowed upon just such quiet little men. At his work he was clever and industrious, and of ambitions he had but one. Toward this, the success and happiness of his children, he bent every energy.

Of these children, Jean Pierre, the son, was fast approaching manhood. He was a dark handsome youth, very quick of eye and hand, and from his mother he had inherited his full share of Spanish pride and temper. On account of his brown skin they called him "Dago" when first he came to the woods, but the name did not stick. Or rather I should say that, due to Jean Pierre's ability with his fists, the wood-folk did not stick to the name.

The daughter, Jeanne, was only a little thing at that time. Like Jean Pierre she was dark skinned and handsome, and in her great black eyes there was already abundant promise of pride and passion to come. It was strange that these children possessed so much of their mother, so little of their father. Gentle, simple old Fagot was like some thrush that has fledged a brace of hawks.

But Fagot, father-like, could never be brought to realize this difference. The children were dark, perhaps, but this was their only heritage from their mother. In all other respects they were exactly like himself. Had he not, foreseeing this, baptized them Jean and Jeanne? They would continue like him if only to show the reason for their names.

Thus, when, at the age of twenty, Jean Pierre became involved in a serious affair, Fagot's surprise was only equaled by his dismay. Of the affair itself, a few words will suffice.

It occurred one Mardi Gras in a coffee-house at Landry where some half drunken idler applied the

old term of "Dago" to Jean Pierre. As was usual the boy replied at once with a blow. After that it was the old quarrel of kind against kind, the townspeople opposing the wood-folk. Thus there was a general fight in which knives were used as freely as fists. In the end, when peace was finally restored, it was found that the chief troublemaker had been seriously wounded.

Later, when, through neglect, the injured man died, all involved in the affair were put on trial. Of the lot Jean Pierre only was convicted. There was no evidence to show that he had actually caused the wound. It was merely proved that he had been opposed to the dead man at the beginning of the mêlée. Jean Pierre swore that he had used nothing but his fists; that he had not carried so much as a pen knife. Nevertheless they sent him to prison for ten years.

It was hard for one of Fagot's family pride. Yet he behaved with admirable courage.

"Jean Pierre will show them when he comes out," he said to me, his big voice trembling piti-

fully with the words. "He is innocent, and the truth can not remain hidden forever. I can only count the time until he is out again. First it will be the years, then the months, and then the days. They say that if one behaves one need not serve out a full term, and my son is a good boy. I shall be here waiting for him, and he will find his ax in its accustomed corner. Also it will be as bright as when he went away."

So Fagot kept on for two years, polishing the ax and counting off time. Then there came bad news from Baton Rouge. Jean Pierre, accustomed to the clean open life of the woods, had been unable to stand his confinement. It had broken his heart, and he had died.

It was the last blow, and Fagot's supply of courage had been taxed to the utmost. For two weeks he shut himself up in his hut, and in that time his dark bristly hair became streaked with white, like the ash-tips of a burned off marsh. Then, one afternoon when I was considering how best I might comfort him, he called to me from

outside my door. He seemed utterly crushed and broken, and the small bundle of household possessions that he carried announced his intention even before he spoke.

"I am going, Bossu," said he. "Also, before I leave, I wish to thank you. You stood by me bravely in my trouble, and I will not forget."

"Where are you bound, Fagot?" I asked him.

He shrugged, sweeping his arm in a circle.

"Anywhere, everywhere," he replied. "I seek only to escape from memory. As long as the trees grow we shall not starve—the little Jeanne and I."

Thus he departed, his ax upon his shoulder, his small, dark-faced daughter trotting along at his side.

CHAPTER II

THE LILY TRAP

IT WAS perhaps some ten years later that I determined, one spring, to make a visit to the swamps. As a youth I had been a swamper. That was when I was tall and straight, and men called me by my name of Jean. Then a tree fell upon me, and I became Le Bossu, and made my home in the Grand Woods.

It is good in the woods, yet one, thinking of the scenes of his youth, must ever wish to return to them. Thus, when this spring brought a great drought that ruined the hunting, I made up my mind that I would go back to the cypress and see those things that I had known so long ago.

That was an expedition—that one to the swamps. Taking what money I had, I made my

way across the prairies to St. Pierre and the Teche. There I bought a pirogue and, loading it with such supplies as I might need, I set forth *au large* upon the bayou.

From the first I had no definite goal. I only drifted with the smooth brown stream, watching the life of its banks. Now it was a heron, standing as straight and as motionless as the rushes behind him, again it was an alligator sunning himself upon a log; and always there was the blue sky above and the water below.

Also I saw great growths of that lily which is called the water hyacinth, where they had anchored themselves to the mud, and stretched out in huge mats of green, half blocking the bayou. They were new to me then, for they had not been long in our country, and they do not thrive upon the waters of the coast, being killed by the salt.

That night I anchored my pirogue alongside a stranded bank of the lilies, and when, at dawn, the first sunbeams flashed upon the purple of their dew-drenched blossoms, it was like some

glimpse of Paradise. And then, in less than an hour, these same hyacinths all but gave me a look at Paradise itself.

It was when, seeing a tow of logs against the bayou bank, I stopped to catch my breakfast. Mooring my pirogue in clear water, I set forth across the raft to a spot where the lilies grew close and thick—a spot to which I could not otherwise have made my way. It was my intention to part the plants and to fish below them for those small sweet perch that one eats at a bite.

Swiftly I ran along the raft forgetting, in my haste, my early training. And there, waiting for me, was that loose log which is so often the doom of the swamper. It was wet and slippery, and it turned beneath me like some living thing, hurling me against the outer edge, whence I bounded off on to the broad green carpet of the lilies.

Had I not been stunned, the matter would have been a simple one. By working carefully, I might well have made my way to the raft

again. As it was I went straight down—swallowing great mouthfuls of water.

When I rose, half choked, there was the lilies to contend with. I was in a trap of smooth green balls, all fringed and spiked with leaves and blossoms.

I could not swim, for there was no water to swim in—only the tiny writhing roots that curled about me like serpents, dragging me down.

Thus I sank for the second time, to rise once more and clutch at the false support of the lilies that were my destruction. Then, as they gave way beneath my fingers, I heard a shout and a splashing of water.

"So," I thought to myself. "This death is a strange business since I, who have just fallen in, imagine that I have been struggling to save myself." And, very slowly, I sank for the last time.

When I became conscious again, I found myself back upon the raft with a man beside me. He was a young man, small yet compact, with smooth clean-cut features, and calm gray eyes.

That he had been in the bayou was evident, since the water ran off him in streams. Yet, for all his plight, his look was both pleasant and kindly.

"Pardon, M'sieu," said I, "but I would like to know if I am dead. I am convinced of the matter, yet this raft is familiar, and you seem little like an angel."

At my words he threw back his head and laughed—the clear happy laugh that is given only to those whose hearts are clean.

"Never fear, my friend," he replied. "This is the raft that you fell from, and as for myself, I am no more an angel than you are a corpse.

"Yet you were near your end and I also, for the current had taken you well under the lilies, and you fought hard before I could bring you to safety. Be advised by me and do not run again upon the logs as, from a distance, I saw you do. Each raft has a snare, set and waiting, for the first thoughtless one who comes along."

"That is true, as I know only too well," said I. "And now for my thanks which—"

"Let us consider it said," he broke in. "It is only what you would have done yourself."

"*Bien,*" I agreed. "Yet I will not forget. I am Jean Le Bossu."

"And I," said he, "am Marcel Var."

After this we sat upon the raft, twisting the water from our clothes, and talking. Marcel Var, I learned, was a swamper. Just now he was free, but that very morning he had been told of a place at the camp of Joe Coudron. Perhaps he would go there, perhaps not. At all events he must be moving on.

Again I tried to thank him, but he waved the matter away. Also he refused my offer of fire and breakfast, saying that the sun would dry him, and that he had eaten a while before.

And so, having freed his pirogue from the bed of lilies, he called "*Adieu,*" and paddled away, leaving me to stare after him until he had slipped out of sight around a bend of the stream.

CHAPTER III

A WORD IN TIME

MOVING on through the tangle of waterways, I journeyed lazily until the fields and meadows of the cane country gave way to long stretches of forest; until these—the solid ground swept away from them by the ever-encroaching bayou—yielded their place to the water-loving cypress.

Thus far I had progressed beneath smiling sunlit skies. Now, however, as I approached the outskirts of the swamp, the weather suddenly changed. It was as though Nature, foreseeing what was to come, sent forth her warning there at the edge of the cypress.

The storm, which gathered quickly, surprised me as I slept away the heat of the afternoon.

Less than an hour before I had forsaken the merciless glare of a cloudless sky for the shelter of a clump of willows. Awakening beneath the chill touch of a puff of wind, I peered out through the green scatter of leaves to find a dusk like that of the twilight. Overhead great black masses of cloud hung menacingly, and the air was stale and exhausted, as though the life had been sucked out of it by the elements above.

One glance at my shelter showed that it would not serve for even a passing shower. Also, as I rapidly reviewed the morning's journey, I remembered that I had not passed a single hut upon either bank for a good number of miles. True I had weathered many storms, but few men will submit to a soaking when there is any possibility of escape. In addition there was every indication that the downpour would last throughout the night. Slipping out from the willows, I set off up-stream at my best pace confident that, through the lack of civilization below, I would soon find some shelter above.

Once out upon the bayou, I found that I had little time. Already the wind-puffs had ruffled the water into a myriad of ripples that broke against the bow of my pirogue with a soft splashing sound. Far ahead the stream curved outward, its banks merging vaguely with the blackness of the horizon. Up to that curve there was no sign of habitation, the trees growing down without a break to the water's edge. It was a long pull, and even as I settled down to it, the first dull thunder began to rumble overhead.

Half-way to the curve there fell a sudden calm. The puffs ceased, the ripples smoothed, the thunder growled itself into silence. Again the air became flat and stale, while all about there hung a hush as of expectation. So still was it that I could hear distinctly the splash of each tiny drop that fell from my upraised paddle.

"Now for it," I said to myself, and as I spoke the storm broke in an uproar of rain, and wind, and rolling thunder.

It was a deluge such as I had seldom seen.

Despite the wind the rain came straight down in huge splashing drops with a force like that of hail. The bayou, whipped into muddy froth, disappeared at once beneath a veil of fine scattered spray.

Instinctively I turned in toward the shore, hugging the protection of the wind-beaten trees. Here the air was comparatively clear and, chancing the peril of the lightning, I pushed steadily forward toward the bend. Once a bolt struck directly in front of me, shattering a great cypress as one strips a cane stalk. Yet I held my position, preferring the risk to the full smiting force of the rain.

I made the bend and, pausing in the lee of another willow clump, sought to take my bearings. Ahead the bayou widened into a broad, shallow reach all lashed and foaming from the storm. The near bank as far as I could see presented a series of submerged mud flats sparsely grown with rushes. Of the far bank I could catch only an occasional glimpse of vague writhing tree-tops through the thick white wall of the flood.

Then, as drenched and chill I prepared to continue my journey, the wind tore a sudden rift in the downpour and I caught, low down near the water's edge, a glint of wet planking. An instant later I was out in the stream paddling thankfully toward the shelter of which I was now assured.

The landing, when I reached it, already harbored some half-dozen boats and pirogues. It was only a narrow platform of flimsy boards built out at the edge of a flat, and connected with the bayou bank by a single line of planks. These planks ended at the foot of a short flight of steps which in turn led up to the porch of a squat unpainted building. Upon this porch a knot of men had gathered to witness my arrival and, as I swung alongside, they began to shout at me with the boisterous good-humor of those who, having been unfortunate themselves, are fully capable of appreciating the discomforts of a fellow-sufferer.

"Tell me, little man," cried one, "is it damp out there?"

"It is fully as wet above as it is below, eh?" laughed another.

"Come, hurry if you would find a place," growled a third in a harsh unpleasant voice. "There is little room here, and the boats are arriving fast. It will be first come, first served."

This seemed good advice, despite the speaker's tone, and, snatching my gun and blankets, I sprang out upon the landing. Then, with but one swift glance to make sure of my footing, I hurried up toward the shore.

The slippery planks sagged dangerously beneath my tread, yet, through long experience upon treacherous marshes, I had little fear of disaster. Indeed I had already begun to quicken my pace when one of the watchers, springing down the steps, held up a warning hand.

"Hold, my friend," he called in a voice that was strangely familiar. "It is a trick. Stop where you are if you would not find yourself in the mud."

As he spoke he pointed to the last of the planks upon which I had been about to set my foot. This plank, having been pried from the post which

supported it, had been drawn shoreward until its outer end touched only the merest fraction of the post's edge. So delicately was it balanced that the weight of a child would have served to send it crashing downward. It was a drop of eight feet or more, and the mud was of that rank black sort that stains the skin like some offensive dye.

Stooping I made the plank safe, after which I stepped along it with a carefulness that brought forth a roar of laughter from the porch. When, however, I arrived, the laughter ceased abruptly; the men, with but two exceptions, glancing at one another in the shamefaced manner of a party of boys caught in some foolish prank.

Of these exceptions, one was the man who had called to me in warning. Also, now that I was free of the driving rain, I saw at first glance that he was Marcel Var, my friend of the lilies.

He smiled as his eyes met mine, but in the action there was none of the shame of the others. Rather he seemed to express sympathy together with a species of quiet contempt.

Standing away from him upon the opposite end of the porch was a huge heavily-built man of about the same age. Despite its great size his body was well proportioned, while his bronzed face, although a trifle heavy, was very handsome in a bold insolent way. Yet, for all his striking appearance, he seemed wholly destitute of that simple good-humor which is ever the particular charm of such giant-like men. Flushed, scowling, he glared across at the smaller man with every evidence of a slow and sullen anger.

Having leaned my gun out of the wet and deposited my blankets beside it, I proceeded to shake the water from my clothes. Then I turned to Var.

"Again I thank you," said I, "and with almost as much reason. From experience I know that that mud is even more unpleasant than it looks."

Moving toward me, Var was about to reply, when a voice broke in from across the porch. It was the same harsh voice that had urged me to hasten upon my arrival, and it came from the

big man. Not content with fixing his plank, he had sought to hurry me on to it.

"Nevertheless the mud can scarce be as unpleasant as a spoil-sport in a crowd of good fellows."

To this thrust Var made immediate reply.

"There are spoil-sports and spoil-sports, M'sieu," he returned easily. "Had your victim been one of the good fellows of whom you have just spoken, I would have held my peace. Being who he is—"

He broke off abruptly, finishing his speech by means of a glance at my twisted shoulders.

The big man growled his disgust.

"So that is it, eh?" he sneered. "Just the same, my friend, had you used your eyes, you would have seen that, for all his broken back, he was as spry as the rest of us."

At this my own temper rose. It was not on account of his reference to my misfortune, since I have never been sensitive about that. It was his loud bullying tone, together with the thought of how he had meant to serve me.

"Yes indeed, I am spry, M'sieu," I flared. "Also, had I fallen into that mud, you might have been treated to even a better exhibition of my spryness. That you are very large I will admit, but the bigger the man, the better the target."

While speaking I had moved gradually toward my gun so that, in case of need, I could make good my words. At this moment, however, the door of the building opened to admit to the porch a stout, jolly-looking man, whose round moon-like face was set with a pair of small twinkling eyes. Pausing in the doorway he smiled genially about him, the living embodiment of the sign above his head. This sign, which was nailed to the top of the door-sill, had once formed part of a packing-case. Now it announced in smeared, black letters:

A. LONSON

GENERAL SUPPLIES

"Well, my friends?" inquired M'sieu Lonson anxiously. "Is it that you find it more pleasant

outside than in? If this is the case only say so, and I will set up my business upon the porch."

His words produced a general laugh to which even the big man added a sulky smile. That the air had been cleared by the proprietor's drollery was evident, and I at once began to regret my show of temper. After all, I thought, the trick had not been intended for myself in particular. It had merely been arranged for the first unfortunate who came along, and I should have accepted the affair in a better spirit. As it was I had succeeded in creating a bad impression among a crowd of strangers in whose company I would be forced to pass the night. It now remained for me to make amends.

Glancing past M'sieu Lonson, I caught, through the half opened door, the end of a rough bar. At once the problem of my penitence was solved.

"*Bien,* M'sieu," said I in reply to the landlord's query, "if you will promise to keep it as wet indoors as out, I for one will not insist upon a removal of your fixtures."

And I added, addressing the company at large, "Come, my friends. What do you say? If I fill them up all round, will it not ease your disappointment at not seeing me play mole out there upon the flat?"

The big man, his ill-humor gone, called out an acceptance with the rest.

"Well spoken, little one," he cried. "Had I known your intentions, I would never have fixed that plank."

"Think no more of it, M'sieu," said I. "It is the way of the world. Perhaps we would all be better off if we did not continually tumble our good fortune into the mud."

Var accepted with a silent nod. Throughout the brief argument he alone had remained calm, yet somehow I knew that this calmness had not been born of any sense of fear. At the bar he lined up beside me, ordering a bottle of the red pop that is known as *rouge*.

"You are an abstainer then?" I asked, as I choked down the rank liquor which was necessary after my drenching.

He shrugged, glancing up the bar to where the big man was already shouting for a second round.

"Upon occasion, yes," he replied. "I have found that it pays."

CHAPTER IV

A NIGHT AT LONSON'S

M'SIEU LONSON'S sign, if crude, proved eminently truthful. Indeed had it read "Every Supply" instead of "General Supplies" it would still have remained inside the bounds of veracity. The store was small, even for its particular class of trade, yet it contained a varied assortment of goods that were stacked upon shelves along the right-hand side of the room.

There were food, clothing, footgear, headgear, ammunition, fishing-tackle—in fact everything that could possibly be desired by a traveler of the bayou.

The left-hand side of the establishment was occupied by the bar which, being a short one, left room at one end for two battered tables, each of them furnished with a square of carpet and a heap

of chips. At the rear a door led into a small lean-to which was reserved for the proprietor's private use.

Considering its remote situation it was a most admirable combination of store and coffee-house, a fact with which I acquainted M'sieu Lonson during the lull that followed the ordering of the second round.

The proprietor accepted my compliment with the air of one who is only receiving his just dues.

"Yes," he agreed, "it is a good place—the best between here and the swamps. Believe me or not, as you please, but the present company is no more than my usual nightly crowd. It has been suggested that I charge for sleeping space upon my floor, but I am not one of your grasping kind. Some people, were it permissible, would charge for the very air breathed about their premises."

He broke off with a snort of virtuous indignation while I, having long lost track of the shifting population of the swamp, prepared to turn his talkativeness to my own advantage. By now, all

hopes of a third round having been abandoned, the men had drifted away from the bar, some of them sitting down to the tables, others squatting about in little groups, their backs against the counter that ran along the opposite side of the room.

Overhead the rain drummed upon the roof with the endless monotony of an all-night downpour. It was already the hour of sunset, and in front the unshuttered windows showed dark and opaque against the shadows of the porch. Soon there would be a demand for food, followed by a gradual revelry. At first the drinks would come slowly, the bets upon the cards would be small. Later the gambling, the drinking, would proceed at the highest pressure of which these men were capable. Then, tired Nature asserting herself, the blankets would be unrolled, the lights would be put out, the losers, with a final, sleepy oath, would compose themselves to sleep.

I had seen many such nights and I knew that, if I would gain any information from M'sieu Lon-

son, I must set about the matter at once. Later, in his capacity of bartender and general peace-maker, he would have no time for ordinary affairs.

"Then you know the swamp-folk well?" I began.

M'sieu Lonson smiled—almost pityingly.

"Know them?" he echoed. "Why I know things about most of them, my friend, of which they are not even aware themselves."

"The big man there then—he of the loud voice?" I went on. "What of him?"

"That is Blaise Duron," replied M'sieu Lonson promptly.

His tone implied that, were I not wholly ignorant, a further description would be unnecessary; nor, as a matter of fact, was I in need of one. I had heard frequently of Blaise Duron in the towns and villages along the bayou. He often came in from the swamps upon the tow boats, and the coffee-house keepers had great tales to tell of his strength and temper.

That he was a bully had been shown to me a while before. Now, as I looked about me, I saw that he was a selfish one. He sat tipped far back in a chair, his feet crossed comfortably upon the table before him. Apparently he was only taking his ease, but he was taking it in a manner that deprived his companions of all use of the table.

"This Duron seems very much at home here," I could not help from observing.

M'sieu Lonson raised his fat shoulders.

"He is very much at home everywhere, my friend," he returned. "He makes it his business to be so. And when he has been drinking—"

He paused, glanced uneasily in Duron's direction, and added in a lower tone, "You were lucky to arrive when you did and not later, little man. Otherwise you would have gone into the mud willy-nilly. Also, if you will take my advice, you will make no further reference to the affair even in jest. Once drunk, Duron is ever upon the look-out for trouble. It would not be pleasant for any of us were he to be met half-way."

Left to himself M'sieu Lonson would have gone on endlessly about this bad man of the swamp, but I had already heard more than enough of him. Also I was anxious to learn what I could of my preserver.

"*Bien,* M'sieu," said I shortly. "You may count upon my discretion. And now for the smaller man at the second table—the one with the calm yet searching eyes. What can you tell me of him?"

M'sieu Lonson surveyed me with a look of displeasure that was almost childish in its frankness. Evidently he did not relish my interrupting the praises of his hero.

"Oh, that one," he exclaimed impatiently. "That is only Var—Marcel Var—a person of little importance. He is one of your tight-mouthed men, harmless, I grant you, but very dull. Some say that his kind are deep, but for myself I prefer the open free-spoken sort like Duron. If they are dangerous at times, they are also very interesting."

After this, although I inquired about several of the other men, I received scant reward for my pains. Always M'sieu Lonson would dismiss them with a word or two, ending up with a comparison that would bring him back to the redoubtable Duron. In the end, abandoning my inquiries, I bought some food and retired to a corner whence, while I ate, I could take note of all that went on about me.

The next hour—which was devoted to an early meal and the arrival of a few belated stragglers—passed quietly enough. Then, when the cigarettes were rolled and the pipes had been packed, the men settled down to the real business of the evening. At the first of the two tables a game of stud poker was begun with Duron as its banker and leading spirit. For a space this game occupied the attention of the entire company, those who were unable to find a place watching the play from over the shoulders of their more fortunate companions. Then, when the interest began to wane, other games were started, some sitting

down to euchre at the second table, others standing up to dice at the bar and counter.

Soon the room became obscured by a thick pall of tobacco smoke through which M'sieu Lonson hurried ponderously as he filled the orders that were shouted at him from every side. Glasses clinked, chips rattled, all spoke at the top of their voices, the winners cheering their luck, the losers humorously bewailing their misfortune. The revelry had begun, and for the present its note was one of careless good humor.

Seated in my corner I watched the lively scene, well content to play the part of spectator. As a hunter I had long before realized the importance of a clear eye and steady hand, and had therefore confined my drinking to moments of necessity. Gambling I cared for only as a means of passing away the time, and just now I was in no need of amusement.

True, M'sieu Lonson might think me his one bad customer, but even upon this point my conscience was at rest. In the morning I meant to

make up to him for my abstinence by renewing such of my supplies as had been spoiled by the storm.

CHAPTER V

ONE WAY OUT OF A QUARREL

UPON looking about me, however, I saw that there was yet another who took no part in the fun. Marcel Var, true to his reputation of quiet unobtrusiveness, was also neither drinking nor gambling. Seated upon the counter, he followed the fortunes of a group of dice players, calling an occasional word of encouragement to them through the smoke of his cigarette. That he was of this group, if not an actual player, he proved by standing treat as regularly as his turn came round; but always he either refused the liquor, or ordered a bottle of *rouge*.

Somehow, for all his air of quiet ease, he gave me the impression that he was waiting for something. As the night wore on this something declared itself in a manner that was understood by all.

The first hint came from the poker table where a loud outburst of oaths announced the fact that Blaise Duron had been deprived of an especially large pot. All along the big man had been drinking heavily, but thus far the luck had been on his side. Now, with this first considerable loss, his temper began to assert itself.

Rising angrily, he hurled the cards into a corner, and shouted to M'sieu Lonson for a fresh pack. Then, as, waiting, he glanced ominously about the room, his glance fell upon the quiet figure seated near the dice players. At once Duron's glare became fixed. His eyes narrowed, and his hands began a clenching movement. The bully, recalling the incidents of the afternoon, had discovered an outlet for his ill-humor.

"Hola, you, over there upon the counter," he demanded insolently. "Why is it that you are not enjoying yourself? Is it that you are without money? If so you have chosen the wrong place for a night's lodging."

It so happened that at the moment Var was in

the act of lighting a cigarette. Before replying he struck his match and held it up with fingers so steady that the tiny flame burned without a waver.

"Pardon, M'sieu," said he, "but you do not allow for a difference in tastes. You are enjoying yourself in your way, I in mine. As for my money, surely that is a matter which concerns only our host and myself."

To this Duron replied with a scowl, half of anger, half of perplexity. Having been balked in his attempt to provoke the other to a sharp answer he now seemed, in a slow-witted manner, to be seeking some other mode of attack. It is probable that, abandoning the effort, he would soon have burst forth in a torrent of frank abuse, had not M'sieu Lonson intervened.

"Come, come, my friend," he cried as he lunged forward from the bar. "Let us waste no time in argument. See, here are the cards, and a lucky deck, I'll warrant you. Play, man, play, if you would get back your losses."

Slowly, and with a mutter of reluctant oaths, Duron allowed himself to be seated at the table again. The cards were dealt, the chips were bet, the game proceeded as before. Yet, despite the briefness of the interruption, the room had exchanged its atmosphere of careless enjoyment for one of uneasy expectancy.

Men glanced at one another between deals. The dice players, halting their play, insisted that Var should join them. M'sieu Lonson, his jovial face puckered into a frown of anxiety, hovered restlessly between poker table and counter. The bully, having threatened, had been mollified. From now on the peace of the night would hang upon his mood.

Leaving my corner I moved over to the counter, resolved that, in case of trouble, Var should at least have such assistance as I could render him. In the first place my debt to him was a large one. In the second, despite his great size, I was not in the least afraid of Duron.

The next hour, however, passed uneventfully.

Duron's luck had returned, and his spirits rose with each fresh addition to his barricade of chips.

Then, with the raising of the stakes toward midnight, fortune again deserted him. Now that the pots had grown larger, it seemed impossible for him to win one, although he repeatedly held the strongest hand up to the dealing of the final card.

Exasperating to most men, this continued ill-luck served gradually to drive Duron into a frenzy. First he cursed the cards. Next he cursed the players, going out of his way to heap upon the troubled head of M'sieu Lonson a wholly unmerited amount of abuse. Later he relapsed into a sullen grumble whose burden was that, through the interference of a certain spoil-sport, his night's luck had gone awry.

From then on all hope of peace was abandoned. Duron had declared himself, and M'sieu Lonson, with a gesture of helplessness, returned to his original position behind the bar. The games proceeded mechanically, their players' inter-

est now wholly centered upon the bully's next move.

It came as before with the big man's rising and hurling the cards in a scattered shower against the opposite wall. Then, having ordered another pack, he turned savagely upon the one whom he had chosen as the object of his wrath.

"What, M'sieu Spoil-sport, are you still idle then?" he snarled. "I thought that I had suggested your taking some part in the fun? Come now, let us see what you can do besides sitting around like a sick cat."

He paused and, jerking back the sleeves of his blouse, displayed a pair of enormous, knotted arms.

"Come now," he repeated threateningly. "I myself will direct the proceedings."

In the hush that followed that demand, Var dropped lightly from the counter to the floor. If his look was grave as he faced his tormentor, his eyes held a glint of grim determination. He spoke slowly, yet without hesitation, and in all that fol-

lowed his actions were those of one who is carrying out a series of carefully considered moves.

"M'sieu," he began, "it seems to me that you are troubling yourself greatly about a matter that does not in the least concern you. As I have said, I am enjoying myself in my own way. However, since it appears that I have done nothing toward the general amusement, I will, if it suits the rest, strive to add my bit to the fun."

He broke off as though waiting for some word of encouragement, but the room remained silent save for the pounding of the rain.

"Come then, hurry," ordered Duron roughly. "You need not mind the rest. I will be the one to pass upon this bit of yours."

Bowing ironically, Var stepped forward, as though to cross the room. A gasp of astonishment arose from the watchers at this advance upon his enemy, and Duron, moving out from the table, adopted an attitude of defense. As for myself, I reached back toward the counter for an empty bottle, my eyes fixed upon a certain spot

behind the bully's left ear where I planned to land my first blow.

But Var, upon gaining the center of the room, paused abruptly and called to the landlord.

"That new deck, if you please, M'sieu Lonson," he requested.

Then, having received the cards, he turned so as to face Duron, at the same time slipping the pack from its case and holding it out between his two hands.

"Observe, M'sieu," he directed crisply. "Try this the next time that you are unfortunate, and see if it does not serve you better than scattering your luck about."

As he spoke Var tightened his grip upon the ends of the pack, stiffening his arms until they were as rigid as iron bars. Next came a twist, a wrench, the crackle of parting pasteboard. Then the hands swung free, each of them holding a half of the pack which had been torn neatly across its middle.

Again the company gasped, this time in aston-

ishment. It was a pretty feat and it had been accomplished with an ease, a swiftness, beyond the power of description.

Opening his hands, Var allowed two little showers of torn pasteboard to flutter down upon the floor.

"Well, M'sieu?" he inquired meaningly. "Have I spoiled the sport again?"

Duron's smile was sickly as he answered; nor did he inquire as to which particular sport the speaker referred. The pack had been new, and it had been torn with little suggestion of effort. For all his thick-wittedness the bully was not slow to learn in matters that concerned his personal welfare.

"Well done, my friend," he cried with false heartiness. "I thought that I would finally succeed in bringing out the best that was within you."

He waited, that this tribute to his powers might have time to sink in, and then added in the voice of one who is more sure of himself: "And now,

having done your part and earned your rest, I absolve you from both drink and play. I repeat that you have done well."

Some men might have followed up their advantage by suggesting that the bully do better, but Var seemed wholly content with the result of his object lesson. Tossing M'sieu Lonson a coin in payment for the torn pack, he returned to his counter where, despite Duron's continued ill-luck, he remained undisturbed throughout the rest of the play. Later, when the games had ended and the men were preparing for sleep, Var approached me with his blankets.

"If you are agreeable I will bunk beside you, little man," said he.

"Most assuredly," I replied, "especially as I owe you that which goes beyond a word of gratitude. Had your affair of a while ago turned out differently, I might have endeavored to make a small payment. But perhaps my help would not have been needed. That was a pretty show of strength, M'sieu."

He smiled, shrugging away my compliment.

"Rather a pretty trick, as our friend Duron will presently learn," he returned. "It does not require any particular strength of hand to tear a pack. It is all in the knowing how. However, it served as, from the first, I hoped it would."

"Then you expected trouble all along?" I inquired. "You must have known your man."

"I knew his kind," he corrected. "Accordingly I drank *rouge,* and considered a plan. With the order of the first pack the idea came to me. At the proper moment I put it into execution."

"Nevertheless, trick or no trick, it was cleverly done," I persisted.

Slipping between his blankets, he dismissed the affair with a few sleepy words.

"Hardly," he yawned. "It was one way out of a quarrel—that is all."

CHAPTER VI

THE COST OF CARELESSNESS

IT HAD been my intention to continue my journey with those of the company who were returning to the swamp. In this, however, I was defeated by the late hour of my retiring, and the close, smoke-laden atmosphere of the room. Awakening next morning from a heavy sleep, I found that the sun was already well up in the sky, and that—save for two lumbermen bound in to the cypress mills—M'sieu Lonson's guests had taken advantage of a clear dawn to separate upon their different affairs.

Accordingly, having replenished my supplies, I set forth alone through a world that was all asparkle with the rain-drops of the night before. The bayou, muddy and swollen, surged briskly along between its half-submerged clumps of

rushes, and once upon it I traveled to such good purpose that by noon I had reached the outer edge of the swamp.

It was a somber country that I entered then—a country of still black water, of tall fluted trunks, and of vast silent aisles, arched raggedly with a hanging tatter of moss. For hours I would paddle along hearing no sound save the cry of the birds, or the dull thumping splash of some diving turtle. And then, all of a sudden, there would come the call of a voice, the ring of an ax, the sullen crack of a tree as the steel bit into its heart.

"Hola, you, little man," the swampers would greet me. "What is the news outside?" And that night I would sit out late at the camp, while the big brown men listened to my tale of what was afoot in that fresher, brighter world which lay beyond.

So I went on, plunging ever deeper into the heart of the swamp, until I arrived at what I thought to be the most remote of the inner

camps. In this, however, I was mistaken. There was still another camp one day's journey beyond, the swampers told me. It was called Camp Bon and, being built upon high ground, it was the most comfortable spot in the swamp. The cabins were permanent ones, and there were even some women about. In addition, if one made a detour to a certain bayou, one could approach the place by way of open water.

After this nothing would do for me but that I must visit Camp Bon. Also, scorning the advantages of the bayou, I decided to continue my journey through the swamp. I set forth at sunrise the following morning, and, although the day promised to be one of blazing heat, I foresaw no difficulty in my undertaking. The water was up, there was a current, and this current was in my favor. Had it not been for the length of time necessary to such a proceeding, I could have drifted the entire way.

But in the wild nothing is certain. It is ever when one is most confident that trouble peeps

over one's shoulder. Thus, when at noon I found my way barred by an almost impassable tangle of grape-vines and creepers, I made the mistake of forcing my way through them before stopping to rest and eat my midday meal. I was weary and hungry, and in my impatience I set about my task with a carelessness which, later on, was to cost me dear.

Yet I had all but won through, and the bow of my pirogue lay clear of the tangle when I was overtaken by disaster.

It was a vine that caused the trouble—a heavy coil of muscadine that caught me amidships as in some great noose. Seizing it angrily, I flung it aside without one single glance overhead. As I did so a blunt, rusty shape came writhing down from above to twist itself for an instant about my bare right arm. I felt the harsh sickening rasp of the scales, the sharp prick of the fangs, before I tore the moccasin away. It was a cottonmouth and, almost before it had struck the water, I was fighting the poison.

With the aid of my handkerchief and a hastily broken stick, I formed a tourniquet which I twisted above my elbow, knotting it tightly so that it would remain in place. Then, with my hunting knife, I attacked the bite, which was upon my forearm. Marking the spot carefully, with the blade pressed against the skin, I cut cleanly and deeply from one tiny puncture to another.

Now it is never pleasant to cut one's self purposely. Also, when this task is performed by the left arm upon the right, one is rendered clumsy. Thus, as the steel bit into my flesh, I made a sudden movement and the knife, jerking upward, slipped from my grasp into the water. At the moment, save for a flash of annoyance at the loss of a useful tool, I thought little of this mishap. Applying my lips to the wound, I began at once to suck out the poison.

Afterward, when I sought to remove the tourniquet, the knots defied every effort to undo them. They had been drawn cruelly tight, they

were soaked with perspiration and water, and the movements of my left hand were both awkward and uncertain.

"So," said I to myself after some moments of useless struggling. "You will never accomplish anything in your present condition, my friend. You are weak, and shaken, and very much in need of something to eat. First fortify yourself with food, and the matter will prove simple."

Thus, having made one mistake, I capped it with a second, fatal blunder.

As I ate I was not conscious of the swelling of my arm. It was very gradual, and it was accompanied only by a dull throbbing. I had been bitten before, and my treatment had always proved successful. Perhaps it was the heat, the swamp, or an especially active venom. At all events when, after a hasty meal, I again considered the tourniquet, I found it already sunk between two rapidly rising walls of angry flesh.

It was then that the loss of my knife began to assume the proportions of a tragedy. True, I

always traveled with a small ax, but only the day before I had presented it to an obliging swamper. Utterly destitute of any edged tool, I attacked the knots with hands and teeth in a frenzy of desperation. I bit. I tore. I bruised my swollen flesh until it fairly leaped out at me in protest, but all to no avail. In the end, faint and dizzy, I was forced to acknowledge to myself that, without aid, my case was hopeless.

Clear-headed now, when the time for clear-headedness was past, I considered my position. The camp that I had left that morning was probably the nearest civilization but, if I turned back in that direction, the current would be against me. Already the throbbing in my arm had changed to a sharp ache which would soon render paddling impossible. Camp Bon seemed my one hope, and gripping my courage hard, I resumed my interrupted journey.

CHAPTER VII

A SONG AND A GIRL

OF MY struggle through the swamp I do not like to think even now. For the first hour, despite my ever-increasing agony, I managed to paddle. After that I made shift to help the current with my left arm. It was one of those dreadful, breathless days that sometimes herald an early summer, and the swamp, beneath its dense roof of moss and branch, was like some vast oven. As for my arm, it sickened me to look at it. From wrist to shoulder the flesh was puffed to the bursting point, and the tourniquet was pressed in until I marveled that the bones did not crack.

Upon the forearm the two minute punctures of the bite were all but lost amid the general discoloration. They fascinated me, those punctures.

They seemed such a paltry entrance for so great a king as Death.

Toward the end of the third hour I lost my paddle. It slipped from my hand, and I gave it not so much as a glance as it drifted off. By then my torture was unbearable, and my wits were fast leaving me. My arm had swelled until I wondered that, balloon-like, it did not float me away. It was numb now, save at the tourniquet, but the agony of that ever-tightening band was the greatest that I have ever known.

It was dreadful to be so helpless in my misery. I could not even divert myself by struggling uselessly with the knots. They had long since disappeared from view.

Throughout the late afternoon I was for the most part happily insensible. I can recall brief flashes of consciousness in which I stared up from the bottom of my pirogue at the ever-changing roof of the swamp. It was a thick, close-woven roof, speaking of a growth almost primeval, and, from the way it slid past, it was

evident that, if the water had stolen my paddle, it was repairing the loss through the swiftness of its currents. But I was in no condition then to appreciate this tardy repentance of Nature. Half mad with pain and fever, I prayed only for a speedy end to my torment. Had the thought not been denied my darkened mind, I would most certainly have rolled from the pirogue and ended the matter at once.

Near sunset there came a swift change in my condition. My brain cleared suddenly, and the agony in my arm subsided into a dull grinding ache, as from the worrying of some savage animal. Weakly raising myself to a sitting posture, I found that I was drifting between huge ancient ranks of cypress trees whose trunks were all splashed and mottled with a growth of pinkish lichen. The water was thick and dark, but the current bumped me along through the maze of scattered knees with a skill that was more than human. Clear though it was, my brain swam dizzily, while before my eye there pulsed a vague

reddish glow that was shot with an ever-increasing blackness.

"*Bien,* Bossu," I said to myself. "This is the end. At least you will have a vault of no mean proportions."

How long I waited for the blackness to close in upon me I do not know. The lichen vanished, the water cleared, yet still I trembled upright, seeking the end that would not come. And then, even as the last red gleam was flickering out into darkness, I caught, as from an infinite distance, a faint thread of song.

At first I thought it some bird who unknowingly chanted my requiem. An instant later, as it swelled upon a high clear note, I knew it for what it was. Too often had I heard the women croon that old lullaby as they rocked their little ones in the brief twilight of the Grand Woods.

It is strange how we poor humans will cling to the last shred of hope. A moment before I had awaited death with only a feeling of weary impatience. Now I began to fight for my life as

fiercely as though the struggle had only begun. I sought with my very soul to scream, but my parched lips could produce scarce a whisper. I beat with my heels upon the bottom of the pirogue, only to bring forth a faint, thudding sound. Wild with despair, I finally remembered my gun. It lay in the bow and, if only I could find it and shoot it, the report might bring an answer.

Blindly, desperately, fighting off the blackness that beat down upon me in great choking waves, I groped about until my hand finally encountered the stock of my old weapon. With the last ounce of strength I drew back the hammer. Then, as I dropped a limp finger toward the trigger, the blackness triumphed in a roar of sound.

Later I was flashed back to life for an instant by a flood of such agony as only death itself could have withstood. I had but a glimpse, as my eyes fluttered open and shut, but in that glimpse I saw that I was saved.

I lay upon a great, loose heap of green moss

that had been piled into a broad flat-bottomed boat, and over me there bent a young girl. She was dark, and beautiful, and in her hand was an enormous knife. If her eyes held pity, they were also determined, and the blade of her knife was red with blood.

As she stooped to her task again the blackness, mercifully, whirled me away.

CHAPTER VIII

CAMP BON

WHEN next I opened my eyes I found myself in the bunk of a swamper's cabin. It was a strong, well built cabin, and its furnishings, if rude, were of the sort that speak of woman and home. Gay pictures and calendars had been tacked about. Upon the shelf above the open fire straggled a row of little china ornaments. There was even a curtain of some gauzy stuff before the small window in front.

This much I saw in a roving glance before my attention became centered upon one who sat at the side of the bunk. It was the same young girl who had rescued me, and now that I could see her more clearly, I found that her beauty was of a rare and wonderful sort. She was tall and lithe, yet for all her slenderness and grace, there was

that about her which gave one the impression of endurance and strength.

For the rest, she was of a type frankly Spanish. Her eyes were large and dark, her lips red and full, while her cheeks, faintly touched by wind and sun, were of a marvelous, shadowy olive. Her dress, of dull crimson, served well to set off her dark beauty while, as though to heighten the effect, she had thrust through the black heavy masses of her hair a spray of scarlet blossoms.

Seeing that I was looking at her, she nodded pleasantly.

"So you are awake at last, are you, Bossu?" she questioned. "I was beginning to think that you would sleep forever."

"I thank you, Mademoiselle," said I. "You have most certainly saved my life. How was I when you found me?"

"You were all but drowned," she replied. "Your gun had kicked you half into the water, and your head was almost under. Five minutes more

and I would have been too late. You were lucky, Bossu, not only in that I reached you in time, but because I was there to reach you at all. It is very seldom that I go so deep into the swamp."

"And my arm?" I went on.

"That was a terrible business, Bossu," she returned. "Also, with the only instrument at my command, it proved no easy one. But I will show you. If I have cut you often and deep, the fault is not my own."

Rising, she took from a nail driven into the wall a belt. This belt was fitted with a leather scabbard, and from the scabbard she drew a knife such as I had never seen before. I say a knife, since that is what she afterward termed it, but in appearance it was more like some short and heavy sword. The handle, of bone wrapped about with brass wire, ended in a plain but massive guard. The blade, long, flat, and of an extraordinary breadth, rounded off with a bluntness that could scarce be spoken of as a point. Evidently, despite the apparent fineness of its steel, the weapon was

intended for hacking rather than for cut and thrust.

"*Dieu,* Mademoiselle," said I as I gazed at it. "You need not apologize for any cuts that you may have given me. I only wonder that, with such a cleaver, you did not take my arm off entirely. Wherever did you get it?"

The girl smiled as she returned the knife to its sheath.

"It was given me by a sailor at Morgan City," she replied. "He said that in the far off southern country from which he brought it, they use such knives in the cutting of cane. At all events it is most useful to me in clearing my way through the swamp, and I always wear it in my journeys about the camp at night. But enough of my cleaver, as you call it. Tell me now how you, Bossu, came to let the swelling of your arm get beyond you."

Briefly I told her of my carelessness, of my disastrous meal followed by the loss of my knife. Afterward she informed me that I had slept from

one sunset to another. When I asked her name and how it was that she knew my own so well, she only smiled and told me that I had talked enough, and must now go to sleep again. As the dusk was falling, and I still felt very weak and tired, I lost little time in obeying her command.

I awoke the following morning to a great burst of sunshine, and the sound of a loud deep voice that was strangely familiar. The voice came from just outside the open window, and as it rumbled on in greeting to some passer-by, I found little difficulty in placing it. My weariness was gone and the thought that I had fallen into the hands of a well-remembered comrade brought me a feeling of pleasure and comfort. As I raised myself I found that my arm, although weak and tender, was already much improved.

"Hola, you, Jean Fagot," I called, and a moment later my old friend was inside the cabin.

He came forward in a series of short irregular steps, but save for his limp, and the now uniform whiteness of his bristly hair, he had changed

little since that day, ten years before, when he had turned his back upon the Grand Woods.

"Bossu, Bossu," he cried. "It does my heart good to see you. I was busy when you awoke at sunset, and afterward Jeanne would not let me disturb you. And the arm? It is better?"

"The arm will soon be all right again," I assured him. "And so it was the little Jeanne who saved me? I would never have known her, Fagot. This is indeed like old times. In one way, at least, my friend the moccasin has served me well."

We talked throughout the morning, and I learned of Fagot's life since his departure from the woods. He had just drifted about—following the trees. At first he had avoided the swamps, fearing their effect upon his child. Later, as the timber thinned, he had been forced into them. Starting at the outer edge, he had worked his way inward, chopping along from one camp to another until he had been overtaken by the inevitable disaster. As usual it had come from a

jammed pirogue and a falling tree, and he had been lamed beyond the hope of ever swinging his ax again.

After that he had come to his present home. It was a nice place—just the quiet comfortable spot for such a wreck as himself—and Voltaire Bon, the founder and leader of the camp, was very kind. For the rest, he and Jeanne made their living by gathering moss from the swamp. Once it had been rotted down, they tied it in bales and sent it outside by the tow boats that came up every now and then from the cypress mills.

Thus, despite his injury, the old man still took his toll of the trees.

In return I began to tell Fagot of all that had occurred in the woods since his absence, but to my surprise several of the incidents were already known to him.

"Why, Bossu," he teased, when I questioned him, "do you know that you are becoming famous? Even here, in the depths of the swamp, we have heard of your success in matters of investi-

gation. You are becoming quite a detective. I must be careful while you are here, else you may reveal some dark secret of my life to Jeanne."

He paused, while the light humor faded slowly from his eyes, leaving them dull and brooding.

"Ah, Bossu," he went on in a different tone, "I have often thought of what might have occurred had you known of your talents when first we were friends. Then, perhaps, it might have been different. Then, perhaps, the law would have brought justice instead of murder. The right word, the right sign, and my boy might have been saved. But we did not know, Bossu—we did not know."

His voice broke. He bowed his head. In the matter of Jean Pierre's memory those ten years might have been but a day.

"Come, Fagot," I encouraged him. "You must forget the past. That is over and done with. You have Jeanne, and such talents as I am possessed of are at her command. Suppose I employ them in finding her a good husband?"

It was hard to win him back to his former mood, but I persevered until, at midday, he was talking as brightly as before. Then, as Jeanne was away in the swamp, we two ate together. Afterward, feeling strong enough, I left the bunk for a seat outside.

Here I had my first view of Camp Bon, to which, despite their praises, the swampers of the inner camp had done scant justice. In front a broad, open sheet of water stretched away to the distant cypress, lapping its tiny waves against the series of rough landings to which the inhabitants moored their craft. Back of these landings the cabins were built along a sloping crescent of high ground, each with its floor raised upon blocks against the spring floods, each with its ladder-like stairway leading up to a little front porch. Vines grew before the porches. Coarse garments snapped as they dried in the breeze. Here and there, even, a rank green patch of garden stuff told of an industry beyond that of the ax and saw.

It was very strange and very beautiful, this little, permanent settlement in the heart of the swamp. Sunwashed and clean, it flashed like some jewel amid its dark setting of moss, and branch, and rusty foliage.

I will not soon forget that revival of an old friendship. Fagot was still the same gentle creature that he had always been, and when that afternoon Jeanne arrived with her boat-load of moss, our little reunion was made complete. Again I sought to thank the girl, but she only replied by adding to her kindness.

"It is nothing," she protested. "If we swamp-folk did not help one another, we would not long survive. But since you feel that you owe me a debt of gratitude, you can repay it by staying with us throughout the summer. We hear little of the outside world, and unless you have changed since my childhood, you will prove no bad companion. So come, Bossu. Promise that you will remain."

"There is no need for him to promise," boomed

Fagot. "We will hide his pirogue until we are ready to let him go."

"Bien," I agreed. "I shall stay a while, but only upon the understanding that, once my arm is healed, it will be as a helper and not a guest. Hunter though I am, I have often picked moss as well as feathers during a lean season."

Later, when the men returned from the swamp, we again sat out in front, watching the life of the camp. Until far into the dusk the inhabitants hurried about upon their various affairs and always, as they passed the cabin, Fagot would halt them for an introduction to myself. Once, however, when a huge broad-shouldered swamper swaggered by, the introduction proved unnecessary.

"So it is you, is it, little man?" he called.

And he added at sight of my bandaged arm: "Who has been fixing a plank for you this time?"

After he had gone Fagot seemed greatly pleased at the acquaintanceship.

"Then you know Blaise Duron, eh?" he asked.

"But every one knows him to the end of the bayou. He is a man of importance here, is Duron. Voltaire Bon, the leader, is his uncle, and it is well understood that he will some day step into the old man's shoes."

To this I replied briefly; nor did I make any mention of the events at Lonson's. I was Fagot's guest, and the big man was Fagot's friend.

Nevertheless, had Blaise Duron been identified with some other camp, the loss would have disturbed me not at all.

CHAPTER IX

JEANNE

THOSE first days at Camp Bon passed pleasantly enough. Under Jeanne's care my arm healed rapidly, and it was not long before I was able to take my part in the work of my benefactors.

For a time I assisted Fagot as he pottered about his littered back yard, where the moss lay rotting in great piles. Then, with the return of my strength, I joined Jeanne in her harvest of the swamp. The girl knew each nook and cranny of the great stretch of cypress, and no spot, however tangled, seemed inaccessible to her skill. Drawing her great knife, she would hack her way unerringly inside, where, with the aid of a long, spiked pole, she twisted down her spoils into the bottom of her boat. At such times she ever

wore a pair of heavy leather gauntlets, and often she teased me about them.

"See," she would say, holding out her slender shapely arm. "You must get yourself a pair of these, Bossu. Then you can jerk as many vines as you please without risk. Believe me, I have had my full share of unwelcome visitors. If, as they say, the penance for one's sins is lessened by the killing of a snake, I shall spend but a short time in Purgatory."

We became good friends—Jeanne and I—for there was the bond of those earlier days to draw us close together. It was hard to realize that the small brown child with whom I had roamed the woods was now this dark proud beauty of the swamp. I was like one who, passing a rare bud unawares, returns to find it in full and glorious bloom.

Then, as the days wore on, and I knew her better, I came to see that, to Jeanne's beauty of face and form, there was added another, greater beauty of heart and soul. In nature she was

still little more than a child, and if, through her heritage of Spanish blood, her gusts of temper were swift and fierce, they were always quickly followed by the pity and gentleness of her father. Often I have heard those who saw her in anger say, "There is a little vixen for you." But afterward, when in her humbled pride she asked their forgiveness, they would only esteem her the more through the beauty of her repentance.

And I will add in justice to her that, of her many virtues, the least was not charity. If in the care of my arm she had shown much skill, I soon found that it was a skill born of long practise. Whenever illness or disaster showed their dark faces at Camp Bon, there was Jeanne to fight them to the bitter end.

Now living as she did in a remote community, whose inhabitants were for the most part of the opposite sex, I had expected Jeanne to be the object of a great deal of attention. As good as she was beautiful, as industrious as she was clever, she was in every way a girl to be sought

after. True she had her temper, but this, being short-lived, only added to her a certain piquant charm. I had looked for Fagot's cabin to be the nightly shrine of many impatient suitors.

In this, however, I was soon forced to admit myself mistaken. As had been my first night at Camp Bon, so were those that followed. Though the men approached Fagot's little front porch many times between sunset and darkness, they never lingered for even the briefest of calls. Later, despite the seductions of a full and glorious moon, they kept persistently to themselves.

To me this was as perplexing as it was unnatural. Given a girl of Jeanne's beauty and men of my own race, that moonlight should never have been wasted. For a time I puzzled over this strange avoidance. Then, through the gossip of the camp, the mystery was gradually explained.

Years before when Fagot, a crippled useless wreck, had drifted into his present home, Voltaire Bon, the leader, had been very kind to him. He had given the old man a comfortable cabin.

He had suggested the moss picking, arranging himself for regular shipments by the tow boats. He had even supplied Fagot with food and other necessities until the payment for the first shipment had been received.

Later, when his nephew, Blaise Duron, had developed a boyish affection for Fagot's little Jeanne, the leader had crowned his benevolence by approving the match. True, it had been only an affair of children, but in the swamp they marry young. The two old men had looked on and smiled; Voltaire Bon with the contentment born of a good deed, Fagot with the satisfaction of one who sees an opportunity of repaying in part a long-standing debt of kindness.

Later still, as Jeanne's beauty increased with her age, the camp had been given to understand that the girl was for Duron alone. There had been no betrothal, no public announcement. The affair had been merely understood.

Nevertheless several of the men, abandoning such hopes as they might have cherished, had

married girls from elsewhere. The remaining ones—Ledet, Mamus, Trappey and Pesson—had thus far religiously respected the understanding. Jeanne might be desirable, but Voltaire Bon was a leader whose slightest wish was law.

This then was the explanation of Jeanne's neglect—an explanation which, significantly enough, I learned from the camp at large, and not from the actions of the one favored suitor. Indeed, had I relied upon Blaise Duron's attitude to shed any light upon the affair, I would have departed from Camp Bon as ignorant of the true situation as when I arrived.

Secure in his self-conceit and long-recognized proprietorship, the big man treated Jeanne with a lazy patronage that bordered close upon contempt. He desired the girl; that should be enough for her. He would claim her when it suited his convenience.

As for Jeanne herself, if she was dissatisfied with this calm arrangement of her future by others, she made no sign. To Duron's patronage she replied with the intimacy of their long com-

panionship, but beyond this she did not go. There were no sighs or glances when the big man was about. In its way her indifference was fully as marked as his own.

It was a strange courtship, and one that did not promise to be lasting. True, Voltaire Bon ruled his followers with a hand of iron, but even his camp was subject to the many shifts and changes of the swamp. Sooner or later there must come a break in his ranks, admitting some undisciplined stranger from the outer camps. Then, perhaps, Blaise Duron might not swagger so carelessly along the smooth path of his courtship.

"So, Bossu," I said to myself, "if you stay long enough you may see. Once let your bully find a worthy rival, and a dozen Voltaire Bons will not serve to save his from the consequences of his neglect."

Three weeks passed while I waited hopefully. Then, as often happens, the events of an hour changed the establishment of years, and the break occurred.

CHAPTER X

A DEPARTURE AND AN ARRIVAL

CONTRARY to my expectations, the swamp was in no way responsible for the change that took place at Camp Bon. There was no accident of falling tree or glancing blade to turn a useful worker into a helpless cripple. The disturbance came from outside, and it arrived in the shape of a letter which was delivered to Pesson, a veteran of the earliest days.

Five minutes after receiving this letter, Pesson was hurrying from cabin to cabin, shouting his good fortune as he went along.

His old uncle was dead—the one who had owned a farm near St. Pierre. Now the farm had come to him as the nearest relative, and the lawyer had written that he might take possession of it immediately. There would be no more chop-

ping down trees for Jacques Pesson. Instead he would spend his age beneath his own roof, watching the green things come up out of the ground.

So he went on until, having exhausted the congratulations of his companions, he reported his inheritance to Voltaire Bon.

The leader received the news with every evidence of annoyance and regret. A huge, rugged old man, with rough-hewn features and a white flow of beard, he gave one the impression of having existed unchanged throughout the ages. It was as impossible to consider that Voltaire Bon had once been an infant as it was to realize that he would not endure forever.

"*Bien,* Jacques," said he, when Pesson had finished his tale. "Your luck is our misfortune. You will be wanting to leave at once?"

"To-morrow, M'sieu," replied Pesson. "This lawyer writes fairly enough, but words and deeds are ever two different things. I shall not rest easy now until I have turned the key in my own door."

"As you please," agreed the leader. "Only you must pass the word of a vacant place here as you go out."

"Have no fear, M'sieu," Pesson assured him. "I know the very man for you, and will have him here in less than no time. Ever since my old uncle has been sick I have been looking about."

"And this man?" questioned the leader doubtfully.

"His name is Var, and he is with Joe Coudron's crew far out near the edge," replied Pesson. "He is young, but he swings a good ax, and he is also a master at minding his own business. If you are not satisfied with him I, for one, shall be very much surprised."

Early next morning Pesson departed, leaving behind him a vast amount of speculation as to his probable successor. Working as he did at the edge of the swamp, Var was little known. Some had met him in the stores and coffee-houses along the bayou, but little had been learned of the man in these brief encounters.

True, Blaise Duron might have added something upon his own account to the general discussion, but for once in his life the big man kept his opinions to himself. In this, however, I felt that he was acting with real if unexpected wisdom. The disagreement at Lonson's was a thing of the past, and it was also a mere incident of a night's dissipation. To mention it now would be to magnify it out of all proportion.

As for myself, I awaited Var's coming with pleased anticipation. It was not only that he had befriended me. It was also that he had given every promise of being a good companion.

Yet, like Blaise Duron, I kept my own counsel. To begin with, I was little more than a stranger myself. Also those whom we herald with praise are often received with prejudice.

Thus, when some few days later Var arrived, he entered the camp as an unknown quantity. All treated him kindly, but it was with a stiff, a formal kindness which seemed to say—"You are an outsider, and we have been here now for a long

time. Whether you will adapt yourself to our ways or not, remains to be seen."

It was a hard task, this making a place for one's self amid the traditions and prejudices of Camp Bon, yet Var accomplished it without slip or mistake of any kind. Quiet, unassuming, ever observant of the comfort and pleasure of others, he was not long in settling all doubt as to his ability to succeed Pesson in the cabin of the unmarried men.

"He is all right, this Var," said his housemates at the end of a week. "We knew nothing of order or convenience before he arrived."

"At least he minds his own business, as Pesson declared he would," said the rest of the camp. "Had Jacques taken a leaf out of his book, we might miss him the more."

Voltaire Bon said nothing, which was in itself the highest proof of success. Had Var proved unsatisfactory, he would have settled him with a word.

As for Blaise Duron, he exhibited toward the

newcomer that vast majestic indifference with which, save for his uncle, he accepted his world. At their first meeting he greeted Var as an absolute stranger. Afterward he passed him by with a nod or a glance.

What Var thought of the camp in return is best expressed by his words to me soon after his arrival.

"It is a good place, Bossu," said he, "a good place with good people. They are narrow perhaps, but they know the meaning of home. Already I feel that I would like to stay."

"You mean that you will settle down here?" I questioned.

"Why not?" he returned. "Some day I must find a corner of my own. Where better than at Camp Bon?"

As he spoke I fancied that he glanced toward Fagot's cabin, but of this I could not be sure. Having been formally introduced to Jeanne upon entering the camp, he had since then only seen her in passing. True, he had already told

me that he thought her very beautiful, but this was a tribute that no man with good sight could have denied her.

Nevertheless, although I had so little to go upon, I felt even then that the change had brought Duron a rival. At all events Var's words were most encouraging. When a man speaks of settling down, he seldom means that he will do so alone.

CHAPTER XI

THE STAGE IS SET

DESPITE my faith in Jeanne's very evident charms, the month that followed Var's arrival proved a sore trial to my patience. Like most match-makers I was eager for immediate results, and as the days slipped by in quiet uneventfulness, I was driven close to exasperation.

True I had not expected Var to press his suit with the headstrong rashness so common to our kind. Already he had shown himself to be as moderate as he was cautious, and the peculiar condition of affairs at Camp Bon demanded a wary approach. At the most I had expected him to begin by gradually passing from acquaintanceship to friendship, but even this encouragement was denied me. When he met Jeanne he saluted

her stiffly and passed on. At other times he was apparently unconscious of the girl's existence.

As was natural this conduct was accepted by the camp as only a further proof of Var's adaptability. Had he been one of the pioneers, he could not have shown a more careful observance of the leader's unspoken command.

Thus it was a distinct shock to the general confidence when, with the ending of the month and of my forbearance, Var made a definite move. This move was only a brief call paid at Fagot's cabin after the supper hour, yet had he attempted an elopement, he could not have declared his intentions more fully. Later, in answer to the warnings of his housemates, he went further and added to his deed with words.

"My ax is Voltaire Bon's. My affections are my own," said he shortly.

As can be imagined this speech was not long in reaching the ears of Blaise Duron. Deprived themselves, the others were only too eager to welcome a brother in disappointment.

To the surprise of every one, however, the big man remained wholly undisturbed. Half scornful, half amused, he dismissed the affair with a brief outburst of contempt and ridicule.

"So Var is to be my rival, eh?" he growled. "*Bien,* let him try it. Perhaps when Jeanne and I are through with him, we will have succeeded in making him even a bigger fool than Nature intended him to be."

As for the leader, he also heard of Var's proposed rivalry with a shrug of indifference.

It was only what might be expected with a girl as pretty as Jeanne, he declared. Also the newcomer would never be satisfied until he had had his try at winning her. If for any unknown reason this try should show signs of prospering, he, Voltaire Bon, would interfere at once. Otherwise the sooner Var was dismissed the better.

Most men, upon being allowed such a free hand, would have rushed at once to their destruction. Var, however, was one of the rare sort who merely redouble their caution at the

appearance of success. After paying that first call he returned to his former policy of quiet waiting until the camp, having exhausted the possibilities of the situation, passed on to something of fresher interest. Thus, when later on he prepared to resume his attentions, he provoked only a mild amusement.

"Our little moth is after the candle again," smiled the swampers. "He will not rest content now until he has had his wings well singed."

But despite their predictions, Var continued to hover with ever-increasing wariness about the flame of his desire. Indeed, so skilfully did he conduct his campaign that where Jeanne may or may not have discovered the earnest lover, Fagot saw only the casual friend.

For myself, Var's second call had settled all doubt as to the ultimate outcome of the affair. Indeed, so sure was I, that I spoke to him the very next morning.

"Marcel, the time may come when you will need a friend here. If so, you will find me ready."

"*Bien,* Bossu," he replied. "I will not forget."

That was all, yet it doubled my assurance. Now I knew that Var was merely lulling the public suspicion before making a final move. When the opportunity presented itself he would strike again, and this time he would strike hard.

Thus, with the arrival of summer, Camp Bon's little woodland stage was set as for a play. Perhaps, through their lack of evidence, the inhabitants did not realize this. To my watchful eyes it was all only too plain.

Duron, confident in his possession, was acting with a contemptuous assurance that must go far toward destroying him in the eyes of any self-respecting girl. Var, realizing this advantage, was patiently biding his time.

Jeanne alone remained a mystery. Young and care-free, it was impossible to predict her course. The play might be either a tragedy or a comedy. It all depended upon her choice.

So the set stage waited until, upon the Fourteenth of July, the play began.

CHAPTER XII

A SWAMP FÊTE

IT WAS the custom of Voltaire Bon to hold at his camp a fête upon the fourteenth of each July. His youth had been spent among the towns outside, and to the swamp he had brought with him an undying memory of those celebrations wherewith our folk are wont to commemorate the fall of the Bastille. Beginning in a small way with a ball, or perhaps only a feast of gumbo, he had added each year to the fun with sports and competitions, until now the affair was known throughout the length and breadth of the swamp.

As Mardi Gras is to the dweller in the city, as Christmas is to the town-folk, so was the fourteenth of July to the swampers. They spoke of the fête throughout the year, they measured their

feats of strength or of skill according to its standards. Did a pirogue fly swifter, an ax bite deeper, or a tree fall truer than usual, he who was responsible would exclaim—"Ah, but I should have saved that for the fourteenth." And when the day came around, there was no hope of holding even the most distant swampers to their work. They would as soon have labored upon Good Friday.

They began to arrive as early as the morning of the thirteenth, and from then on a scattered stream of visitors poured into the camp. They came in pirogues, in flat-boats, in borrowed gasoline launches. Once even a tow boat swung out of her course to leave behind a fiddler, and a chattering flock of girls who had come up from outside.

The broad open reach in front was half hidden by a multitude of small craft. The short curve of high land was dotted with the innumerable camps of the visitors. The swampers, driven out of their cabins to make room for the women-folk,

took refuge with their friends, and hoped that the weather would remain clear. The air was thick with the smoke of many campfires. The silence of the swamp was made as naught by the shouts of the men, the laughter of the girls. The very birds skimmed madly about, as though imbued with the spirit of the hour.

It was a time of joy, of revelry, and over it all Voltaire Bon presided with a dignity, a courtesy, that could have been equaled by few. Enthroned in state upon his landing, he received each visitor as he arrived, placing him unerringly in his well-ordered memory, even recalling at times some special feat of the year before.

"Welcome, Vital," he would say. "And have you brought your ax with you again? Our own Ledet has made some records lately, so if you would win this time, you must stir yourself."

But if Voltaire Bon was the king of it all, Jeanne was queen. Many girls came to the fête that year, most of them pretty, some of them beautiful, yet there was none who could match

the dark Spanish loveliness of old Fagot's daughter. Clad in a new crimson dress that she had saved for this occasion, she darted about amid the ever shifting groups like some bright flash of laughter and joy. They were mad about her, those visiting swampers. They claimed her for the ball that night. They promised her their prizes if they were fortunate enough to win. For the most part they were free rovers of no permanent camp, and in the matter of a pretty face they hearkened to no man's command.

Yet Duron did not appear jealous. Rather he seemed to take pride in the popularity of his future wife. He agreed heartily to the praises of the others. He even added loud boisterous commendations of his own. He was like one who, having gained possession of a prize, lauds it openly for the purpose of self-glorification.

Var, upon the other hand, seemed ill at ease. Everywhere that Jeanne went he followed her with eyes which held a look of fixed purpose such as I had seldom seen.

"So, Bossu," I said to myself. "It will not be long now before something happens. Also, if he is true to that look, the something will be worth while."

The morning of the fourteenth broke bright and clear and, with the rising of the sun, the sports began. There were running, jumping, wrestling, boxing, a shooting-match—even some fights with game cocks. Afterward all crossed to the near-by cypress where were held the more important contests of the swamper's art. Trees were thrown in the shortest possible space of time. Logs were trimmed as if by magic. Rafts were made, so it seemed, in the twinkling of an eye.

They were gay but earnest, these men of the swamp; going about their tasks with a swiftness and precision that were wonderful to see. It was play perhaps, but it was also the real business of the day; for he who could establish his supremacy over tree, or log, or raft, would be, for the coming year, a king among his kind.

So the fête continued with its victories and disappointments. The judges were fair, and the prizes, if simple, were hard won. The contests were open to all. I had been asked to take part in the shooting, but had declined—feeling myself an outsider—and the prize had gone to Duron.

To his skill with his gun Duron had added other victories, and when all repaired to the feast that had been laid by the women, the big man could scarce contain his importance. Blustering, bragging, he strutted about, followed by a train of admirers. For weeks he had been laying in a supply of liquor, and upon each visit to his cache the throng about him increased. His friends seemed as numerous as his bottles.

Var became even more quiet and reserved than usual. He was a skilful swamper, but he had been matched against the very flower of his calling. He had done well, but no more, and to his credit there was no positive victory. Yet it was whispered by those who knew him that, in the final event, he would redeem himself.

At the feast he ate moderately, refusing each offer of the wine that flowed on every hand. His comrades joked him about his temperance, but I, remembering Lonson's, nodded a wise head. Upon that occasion at least, his abstinence had paid. Perhaps it would pay again.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RACE

SO THE day wore on until, in the late afternoon, there came the final event. This event, the pirogue race, was always reserved for the last, on account of its great popularity. It is curious that, in all the sports and pastimes known to mankind, none can take the place of a race. We may applaud, we may admire all other contests, but to them there is denied that tense excitement, that nerve-wracking suspense, which attends an exhibition of speed.

The swampers had looked on at the felling of trees, the making of rafts with the grave interest of men enjoying the skill of a master workman. Now they crowded down to the water's edge like a band of school-boys upon a holiday, laughing,

shouting, making bets among themselves, calling out words of advice or encouragement to their favorite contestants.

Of these contestants, Blaise Duron was perhaps the most promising. He had lost the race by the merest fraction the year before, and the man who had beaten him was now out of the running. This man—a swamper from an inner camp, with an arm suddenly twisted by rheumatism—spoke confidently to Voltaire Bon of his nephew's success.

"Blaise will win," he prophesied as the racers entered their pirogues. "I know them all, save only your new man Var, and you can see that he has not the necessary strength. Perez is swift, but not swift enough. Yes, my friend, once again you will keep the prize in your own home. I tell you that it is your year."

To this the leader made no reply, but in his rugged face one could see a slowly-increasing look of satisfaction. As a younger man he had won twice in three years, and now, through cour-

tesy, he was always called upon to judge the race's end. The prize—a little bar of silver roughly beaten into the shape of a paddle—he held with a touch almost of reverence. Perhaps he was thinking of the day when he had first pinned it upon the bosom of his wife.

The race was to begin at the edge of the swamp and end at the leader's landing. A short course for these men of the waterways, it called merely for the greatest skill and endurance. He who would win must keep the pace throughout. It was paddle your best from the first, fresh stroke to the last, tortured effort at the finish line.

As the racers moved away toward the trees, a cheer went up from the watchers along the shore. It was a sight that I will long remember—that broad reach of sunlit water, marred in its center by the smoothly skimming craft. The racing pirogues, frail and shell-like, sped precariously, needing only some hostile touch to overturn. The racers paddled with slow easy strokes, saving

themselves for what was to come. And as they went each acted according to his kind; some wasting their breath in useless boasting, others pinning their faith to a still tongue and a flying paddle.

Duron, huge and powerful, answered the call of his admirers with a shout of confidence. Var, sinewy and compact, bent silently to his work. Perez, a close contestant of the year before, moved doggedly along in the rear, as though to preserve the last ounce of his strength. There were others, but they were of little interest to the crowd. In that land of flooded forests their powers were only too well known.

The pirogues reached the edge of the swamp, and formed into a line before the wall of trees. Instantly a hush fell upon the crowd, and all leaned forward in one great concentration of gaze. Then there came the report of a gun—sounding dull and flat across the stretch of water—and the sunlight flashed upon the paddles as the line sprang into life.

Almost immediately the racers drew away into two groups. In front, three pirogues sped arrow-like toward the goal. Behind, the other craft drove half-heartedly forward, as though in disgust at a race already lost.

The crowd cheered madly for the favorites while I, forgetful of my host in my excitement, began to shout directions to my champion.

"Easy, easy, Var," I called. "He can not keep up that pace for long. Save yourself for the end. That is what will count."

Fagot, who stood beside me, gave me a quick glance of surprise.

"Are you not for Duron?" he questioned. "True, Var served you a good turn, but think of Jeanne. Would you not like to see her wear the prize?"

"Jeanne will wear it, never fear," I answered him. "You should use your eyes, my friend."

On came the three, and as they drew nearer, it became ever more apparent that my directions were not to be despised. Upon the right, Duron,

who led, dug in his paddle with quick powerful strokes that tore the still surface of the water into scattered foam. Sure of himself, contemptuous of the others, he staked his chances upon his great strength of arm. It was wonderful, that swift hurling of his great bulk through the water, but the pace was one that no man could stand for long. Already, so it seemed to me, his strokes were lessening in speed and power, while in his crimson face and staring eyes the lesson of his recent excesses could be plainly read.

In the middle Perez forged along with varying success. Now he was a length behind. Now he crept forward to hang for an instant in the lead, before dropping back his length again. His efforts were brief and uncertain, and each moment they grew weaker. Although confident of defeat, he was dogged to the end.

Upon the left, Var held his position of one-half length behind with a persistency that was maddening to the crowd. His stroke was slow but steady, and if he did not gain, he also never lost. Bent low as he was, I could not see his

face, but there was something about his easy regular movements that spoke of a well-nigh exhaustless energy. The young men called to him impatiently, crying that he should either go ahead or drop back, but from the older folk there arose a low murmur of appreciation.

"That is paddling," said one. "It does not look like it, but it is."

"He is wearing Duron down," said another. "He may win yet, if he can only keep his teeth in the big man's throat."

As the first speaker had said, it *was* paddling. It was not showy; rather, there was something about it that was almost uncanny. It did not appear to be a matter of strokes, however skilful. It was as though, instead of moving, the pirogue was held in its never changing position by some smooth, uninterrupted force.

On sped the three until, near the finish line, Duron put all his waning strength into one final effort. Swiftly he shot ahead, and as he came, Var sped unerringly behind him, as though towed by some invisible cord. It was the end,

and, as the big man dropped desperately back, Var inched steadily forward.

But if Duron had lost, it soon became evident that he intended Var to lose also. Fiercely the big man struggled, losing his lead, and then, with a sudden wrenching side stroke, he whirled his pirogue inward toward that of his opponent. An instant and those two frail shells would have collided, but in that instant Perez, from his position in between, made a final effort of his own. Forward he shot with the strength of despair, only to receive the full force of Duron's side-stroke upon the bow of his advancing pirogue.

It was a glancing blow, and by lurching to the swing of it, Perez managed to save himself. Duron was not so fortunate. Handicapped by his great size and weight, he flung back violently from the impact, and with one huge struggling splash, disappeared into the water.

When he arose to the surface an instant later, it was to see Var skim over the finish line with Perez a good two lengths behind him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FLOUTING OF DURON

NOW all that I have described of Duron's trickery took place in a brief flash of time. To one unskilled in such matters the collision of the pirogues might have appeared as only an accident of the race. But there was no deceiving men whose lives were spent upon shallow water, and as Var, coming about, swung in to the landing, he was received with a shout of sympathy and good will.

"Well done, little one," came the cries. "It is fortunate that you are as lucky as you are honest."

As for Voltaire Bon, nothing could have outraged more his sense of justice. Crimson with rage and mortification, he glared silently out to

where his nephew swam slowly ashore. If at that moment Duron had called for aid, I do not believe that he would have lifted a finger to save him.

Always before it had been the leader's habit to deliver a little speech upon the presentation of the prize, but now, when the winner stood before him, he spoke only a few bitter words.

"Here, Marcel," said he, as he held out the silver token. "You have raced well and fairly. I can say no more."

Then the leader rose to his feet and walked with bent head to his cabin, there to remain until the opening of the ball that night. It was not a pleasant thing to witness his shame and grief, and as he passed along the crowd divided silently before him. Under other conditions it would have cheered itself hoarse for the victor. Now, through their love and reverence for their ancient host, these rough swampers paid him the respect of their silence.

Gravely Var watched him go before he, in

turn, faced the crowd. It was his moment of triumph and, according to custom, it was something more. As the winner of the pirogue race he must, through the disposal of his prize, acknowledge his attitude toward the other sex. If he fastened the token upon his hat or blouse it meant that, for the present at least, his affections were free. If, upon the other hand, he had set his heart on the winning of some girl, then, if this girl were present, he must offer her his prize in plain sight of all. Should she accept it, he might hope for success. Should she refuse, it meant that any further effort upon his part would prove but a waste of time.

There fell a sudden tenseness on the silence of the crowd as it turned its gaze upon the winner. Rumors had flown thick and fast since the ending of the race, and it was whispered that there was still another surprise to come. Men glanced to where Duron stood dripping and sullen upon the end of the landing, and wondered if his rival would dare.

Slowly, carefully Var swept the circle of faces until his gaze rested upon Fagot's daughter. Then, stepping quietly forward, he held out the prize to Jeanne.

"For you, if you will have it," said he.

Blushing, smiling, the girl stretched forth her hand. "I thank you, M'sieu," she began, but the rest of her words were lost in a roar of rage as Duron charged up the landing.

"Refuse, Jeanne, refuse," he ordered furiously. "A joke is a joke, I know, but there is such a thing as carrying one too far. At least I will see that you play none of your tricks upon him."

The girl's smile flashed out to be replaced by a look that was altogether new. She did not flare into one of her usual tempers. Rather she seemed to freeze into a chill and deadly calm.

"Tricks, Blaise?" she retorted. "Is it not you, yourself, who are the cleverer at such things?"

Thus accused, and by his sweetheart, the big man began to bluster.

"I played no trick," he roared. "I sought only to swing closer inside, and my stroke was false. Have there not been a hundred spills before? I am prepared to answer any man who doubts my word. But enough of this. Refuse that trinket as is your duty."

"And why is it my duty, Blaise?" asked the girl in the same calm tone.

At this the big man gaped in genuine surprise. Had he been sensible he would, for the moment, have abandoned the affair. Jeanne was plainly in a dangerous mood, and he, bedraggled and disgraced, was ill fitted either to demand or appeal. But toward Duron nature had been far more generous with body than with brain.

"Why is it your duty?" he bellowed. "Are you mad, Jeanne, to ask such a thing? Are you not my promised wife? It is I, your future husband, who command you."

The girl gave a short scornful laugh that rang upon the silence with a cold sharpness, like that of steel.

"If, as you say, you have received a promise, it has most certainly not come from myself," she replied. "Am I an ax or a boat that I am to be given away without a word of my own? Next time you try, Blaise, get your promise from the girl herself, since she alone can make sure of its fulfillment."

Fastening the token upon her dress, she turned to where Var was awaiting the outcome of his offer.

"I thank you, M'sieu," said she again, and without so much as a glance in the big man's direction, she set off toward her home.

Duron, flouted before the crowd, stared vaguely about him, as though he found it impossible to believe that he had heard aright. Had he been quicker, had he not been held by his absolute amazement, he must have flown into a terrible rage. As it was his old conceit and self-assurance came flooding back to him, calming his temper, and sparing him from the consequences of some violent act. Sneeringly he

snapped a thumb and forefinger at Jeanne's retreating form.

"*Bien,*" said he, half to himself and half to the crowd. "There goes a little cat that I will presently tame."

He paused, and for an instant glared at his silent rival.

"As for you, M'sieu Spoil-sport," he went on, "it is high time that we had a reckoning. We will discuss this affair at the first favorable opportunity."

CHAPTER XV

A TRUCE

AS FAGOT and I followed the others up from the water's edge, the old man seemed greatly disturbed. We had witnessed the affair from a distance of but a few feet and, when Jeanne had first begun her words of cold rejection, her father had started forward to interfere. But I had caught his arm, and he had listened to all that followed in bewildered silence, blinking his kind old eyes as at some impossible spectacle. Now, for the first time, he found his tongue.

"*Dieu,* Bossu," he gasped. "Was it really my child who spoke? Why the match was arranged long ago. It was my one way of returning the leader's kindness. Jeanne has her tempers, I know, but to say such things, and before them

all—. What will Voltaire Bon say? What can I say to him?"

Before replying I led the old man out of earshot of the crowd. The time had come for him to understand certain things to which, all along, he had been blind.

"Fagot," I began, "you are viewing this affair from the wrong standpoint. Suppose now that you look at it for a moment not through the leader's eyes, but through Jeanne's. As she asked, is she an ax or a boat, that she is to be given away without a word of her own? Also consider Duron's treatment of her. Has he ever shown her the love, the desire of a true man? Answer these questions before you condemn your daughter."

Fagot growled impatiently.

"Your questions are easily answered, Bossu," he replied. "If Jeanne has been given away without a word of her own, it has been only because she, herself, has not chosen to speak that word. As for Duron, perhaps he has not been very ardent, but what would you have? In these

boy-and-girl affairs, love is apt to become stale. Also it is not every pretty face that wins a prospective leader. No, I can not understand, unless the girl is mad."

"She is not mad, Fagot," I persisted. "She is only human, she is only obeying the commands of her woman's pride. You seem to forget, my friend, that Jeanne had a mother. Consider your wife. What would she have done in such a case?"

The old man nodded slowly. Through the past, he was beginning to understand.

"That is true, Bossu," he admitted. "Jeanne did have a mother, and such a mother. Why I was her poorest chance, yet she married me despite the protests of her entire family. As for what occurred just now, had she been in Jeanne's shoes, Duron would not have got off as easily as he did."

He paused, half smiling as at some vision born of his thoughts, while I lost little time in following up the advantage that I had gained.

"Then think of this when you speak to

Jeanne," I advised. "You can not drive her, and she is counting upon your sympathy. Be your own gentle self, and all may yet be well."

By now we had reached the cabin from which we had been evicted the day before by the visiting women-folk. Therefore, like some visitor, Fagot limped up and knocked for admission. Jeanne herself opened the door, but I did not follow the old man inside. It was his affair, and, now that he understood, I knew that he would make no mistakes.

So I turned away to the temporary camp we had made for the time of the fête where, after some thirty minutes or more, Fagot rejoined me.

"Well?" I questioned.

Fagot spread out his hands.

"What can I say?" he complained. "I do not know my child. She is another person. You remember that winter morning in the woods, Bossu, when we went out to the *coulee* and found it frozen over? Jeanne is like that, hard, and cold—and strange.

"True, she spoke to me, but her words were like a handful of shot. Was she nothing, she asked, that I sought to give her away? Or was it that I was tired of her, and wished the cabin for myself?

"As for Blaise Duron, she declares that he is a cheat and a bully. Also that, come what may, she will never marry him."

"And Var?" I asked.

The old man's look of perplexity deepened.

"That is just it," he grumbled. "She will say nothing of Var. Not one word, Bossu, despite my questionings. And why? If she loves the man, it is time to say so. If not, why turn against Duron?"

He paused to look at me helplessly.

"I am all mixed up, Bossu," he ended. "I tell you that I do not know my own child."

"Wait, my friend," I counseled. "As you say, Jeanne is not herself, but it is only for the moment. When she has cooled down she will tell you everything.

"Should she love Var, at least you will have a proper son-in-law. Otherwise, her flouting of Duron may prove his salvation. Without his bluster he might be a worthy nephew of Voltaire Bon."

Thus I spoke, but all the time I knew that Duron would never change. Through the years of self-indulgence and bravado his shell of conceit had become far too thick to be pierced by any human thrust.

For Var I felt only an increased esteem. I had not forgot his service to me that day upon the bayou, and his actions after the race had thoroughly aroused my admiration. Now that he had declared himself fully, I determined that I would do all in my power to further his suit. Also, in the matter of his affair with Duron, I meant to stand his friend.

I had feared that the two would clash at once, but on this point Fagot quickly undeceived me. There would be no settlement of differences while a single visitor remained at the camp. This

was the one chief law of the fête, and, although he never interfered in such matters at other times, Voltaire Bon was ever prompt in its enforcement. For years the general enjoyment had been unmarred by any disturbance.

That this was true I learned when, a little later, I made the round of the camp. From every side came a hum of excited talk, but through it all there ran no note of apprehension. Once more rumors flew thick and fast. It was said that, through sympathy, the leader had become reconciled to Duron; that he himself would command Jeanne to return the token, and that he would insist on an immediate marriage. Again it was declared that Voltaire Bon had cast off his nephew, that he had openly praised Jeanne as a girl of courage, and that he would bespeak the future leadership for Var.

Each had his opinion which he aired with the freedom of the wild. It was a little thing, perhaps, this flouting of a man by a girl, yet, in the swamps, it is the little things that count. With

folk who are eternally at war with a merciless nature, such matters as death, and accident, and sudden disaster are merely looked on as a part of the day's work.

So, to the accompaniment of an endless babble of comment and conjecture, the night closed down, and the ball began. As was customary the dancing started in the home of the leader, but through lack of space it soon extended itself outdoors. All along the flat open stretch before the cabins the dancers whirled to the scrape of the fiddle, while the moon shone down in a great flood of silver, and the stars twinkled brightly, as though each meant to add its utmost gleam to the fun.

Also, with the first touch of bow to string, the affair of the afternoon seemed completely forgotten. It was all right while waiting for the dark to wonder what the leader would say, how Duron would act, and in what manner Var would respond. Now matters of more importance were afoot. The fiddle called, the girls waited, the

moonlight vied with the lamps inside. For the moment a truce was declared, a truce which extended to the very combatants themselves.

Jeanne, all beauty and gentleness, swung with unclouded brow through the figures of the dance. Duron, arrogant and unashamed, swaggered from one partner to another with an unsteadiness born of innumerable visits to his cache. Var, lifted out of his usual gravity by the merriment of the occasion, footed it with the best.

And over them all Voltaire Bon presided with that calm dignity which was his alone. He was a leader unsurpassed, as was evidenced by the conduct of the ball. It was as though he had said to the members of his camp—"While my guests are here you will behave"—and they, forgetting their differences, had answered with a smile.

They danced all night, those swamp-folk, crowding as best they could inside the cabin when the moonlight waned. And then, with the rising of the sun, they set forth toward their

homes. Throughout the morning the boats moved off into the shadows of the swamp until no visitor remained.

That night the three of us gathered again in Fagot's cabin, but there was little talk before the light was put out. Jeanne, despite her wearing of the silver token, preserved a cold silence toward the events of the day before. Fagot, true to his kindly nature, seemed content to enjoy to the utmost the leader's truce.

As for myself, I too was well satisfied to await the turn of events. Trouble was due, I knew, but it would not come until the morrow. That, if possible, I would be present when it arrived, I promised myself. For the moment I could do no more.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MEETING

WHEN, at daybreak the following morning, Jeanne broke her silence, it was only with a word of request.

"Bossu," she began, "you have often said that you would like to repay what you are pleased to call my kindness. Are you still of the same mind?"

"I am at your command," I answered her.

"Then," said she, "go with the men to the swamp to-day. My father is unable, and I am a woman. You understand what I mean?"

"I would have gone without your asking," I replied. "As you know, I am in Marcel's debt as well as your own. If all felt toward him as I do, he would have nothing to fear."

I waited and, when the girl did not speak, I made another try.

"And you, Jeanne?" I asked. "What of your feeling for Marcel? Do you really love him?"

But my question served only to bring back Jeanne's former hardness.

"Love?" she exclaimed. "Is this the time to talk of love? What we need now is fair play. I shall count upon you, Bossu."

So, respecting her anxiety, I left her with a word of assurance and went down to where the men were setting forth for the swamp. The day was Saturday and the swampers, heavy-eyed and listless from their recent gaiety, went about their departure with a growl of protest. At first they appeared only concerned in deploring the fact that their labor must intervene before the rest of the coming Sabbath. As I watched them closer, I came to see that each man was keyed to a high state of tension. Glances, shrugs, whispers, were covertly exchanged. Each moment Duron and Var were subjected to swift looks of appraisal.

As for these two, they seemed somehow set apart from the rest. It was as though they had been placed in some spot to themselves, while the others stood by and waited. Duron, huge and sullen, glared malignantly from bloodshot eyes. Var, apparently as composed as usual, displayed upon closer inspection a certain tightness about the muscles of his mouth.

Among them all Voltaire Bon alone seemed undisturbed. Brisk and alert, he hurried the departure of his men with an air of absolute unconcern.

"Come, my friends," he cried, as he stepped into his pirogue. "Already we are late. I shall expect a full day's work from each one of you."

It was his usual word of parting, but upon this particular occasion it carried an added meaning. "My guests are gone, and you may settle your differences as you please, only you must first do your work," was what the leader had also said.

As the men straggled away from the landings, I drove my pirogue toward that of Var until the two moved along side by side.

"Marcel," said I, "once I told you that the day might come when you would need me. It is here, and I am ready."

The young man gave me a look of gratitude.

"I thank you, Bossu," he returned. "However, there will be nothing unusual afoot until sunset. You heard what the leader said?"

"Yes," I replied. "And what will you do at sunset?"

"I will stand alone," he answered simply. "I can only thank you for your offer, as I have done with others. At all events I have found some friends."

"But have you considered your position?" I protested. "Duron has twice your size and strength, he is the better shot, and, as you must have learned from the race, he will take any unfair advantage. Before you leave the swamp tonight he will stop you and force a quarrel upon you. Unless you have some friend to stand by and see fair play, you will never come out alive."

Var nodded, but there was only a look of purpose in his steady gaze.

"You are right, Bossu," he agreed, "but, as I once told you, there is more than one way out of a quarrel. You remember Lonson's? Again I have formed a plan which I can best carry out alone. If I am successful, I will leave the encounter unhurt. If I am not, I will at least have an equal chance. When I tell you that, save for yourself, I have confided this much to no one, I am sure that you will respect my wishes."

After this there was nothing to do but to wish Var success, and to leave him alone to the fulfillment of his plan. Nevertheless I spent the rest of the day in the swamp. Also, when near sunset the steel ceased to ring against the cypress, I placed myself in a position where, unseen, I could watch the men as they returned to the camp.

That afternoon the swampers went out in little groups, talking in earnest voices, and casting frequent glances behind them. Duron, I learned, had been working far inside. Var, of his own free will, had chosen a spot even more remote. With each had been a companion, but these companions, stopping early, had joined the rest.

Thus, from his inner position, Duron would meet his rival deep in the swamp. As for the results of this meeting, the others could only speculate upon them. They had been told that, in this affair, it was "hands off" for all.

The men paddled out of hearing while I, slipping from my place of concealment, turned back into the fast gathering dusk of the trees. I too had been told to keep "hands off," but I determined that I would at least have my look at this encounter.

Also, I will say for myself that it was not mere curiosity or interest which caused me to thus disregard the code of the swamp. If Var had refused my aid, Jeanne had requested it, and I felt that my first duty was to her. Should Duron play fair, I would not make my presence known. Should he resort to any trick, I would be on hand to keep the promise that I had given Jeanne.

Making my way carefully through the endless scatter of trunks and knees, I came finally to a spot where, for some time, the main crew had

been working. Here, open to the air and sunlight, lay a narrow length of water, its still surface thickly dotted with the stumps of the vanished trees. Save for these stumps there was no other cover for one wishing to cross unnoticed, and I paused for a moment at the edge of the trees, asking myself how best I might risk the passage.

It was well that I did so, for, even as I hesitated, there came the splash of a paddle from my right, and, an instant later, a pirogue entered the clearing. Thrusting back behind a friendly trunk, I peered forth cautiously and saw that it was Var. By swift paddling he had made a circle about his waiting enemy, and so come out ahead of him.

As the young man passed, almost within reaching distance of me, I was sick with disappointment and disgust. All along he had been my champion. From the first moment of our meeting I had esteemed the promise of his clear gray eyes. And now, after all his talk of stand-

ing alone, he was running away. No wonder he had refused the offer of his friends.

This much I thought before there broke upon the silence of the swamp, the sound of a man singing with all his voice. It was Var's song, the one that he always sang, and, as looking out again I saw him waiting at the clearing's end, the reason for his detour was instantly explained. Wishing to meet his enemy in the open rather than in the tangle beyond, he had been forced to swing about in front of him. Now, by singing an unmistakable song at the top of his lungs, he was making his position known.

"You see, Bossu," I reproved myself. "Perhaps this will teach you to be less hasty in future. You should have known better than to doubt those eyes."

Three verses of his song Var roared out upon the stillness before there came an answering sound from the far side of the swamp. Then Duron shot forth into the clearing with a speed that made the water boil.

CHAPTER XVII

AN AFFAIR OF PIROGUES

AT SIGHT of Var calmly awaiting his arrival, Duron swung about with an abruptness that well-nigh spilled him overside.

"So," he snarled. "I have caught you, have I, my friend? Your speed has not stood you as well as it did the other day."

Var surveyed the other quietly.

"Caught me?" he echoed. "How have you caught me, Duron?"

By way of reply the big man burst into a storm of abuse. Usually, among our folk, it is the custom to begin an encounter with the utmost politeness. Duron, however, through his violent chase, was beside himself with rage.

"And you ask what I mean, you who, by

doubling around me, were seeking to get away?" he roared in conclusion. "Tell me that this is not so that I may call you the liar that you are."

At the insult Var's figure stiffened, but otherwise he made no move.

"Come, Duron," said he. "Even you can not accuse a man of running away when you find him waiting at the first open spot, and singing with all his might. Had you used your ears as well as your paddle, you would have noticed that my song grew louder each instant of your approach. As for my returning home by a roundabout way, surely that is the privilege of every man."

Duron laughed evilly.

"That is very clever, my friend," he sneered. "However, it will not serve you. Running away or not, we have met, which is all that I care about. You are going to fight me, and you are going to fight me now. Was my liar enough for you, or do you need this also to start you into action?"

As he finished Duron thrust forward his pirogue with one hand, while with the other he drew back for a blow. It was a strong blow, and one that would have sent the smaller man into the water but, before it could descend, Var, with a swift stroke, backed out of reach. He still appeared very cool and quiet, but there was a grimness about his reserve now that was terrible to see.

"Wait, Duron," he warned. "There is no need for you to strike me. Had I not meant to fight you, I would never have waited at this spot. If, thus far, I have kept my patience, it has been only that you might begin the quarrel. Unevenly matched as we are, I at least desire the choice of weapons."

The big man grunted his contempt.

"The choice is yours," he agreed scornfully. "Only be quick, so that we may reach solid ground while the light lasts. Also let me advise you not to choose our fists. As, in that event, I shall most certainly beat you to death, your suffering will only last longer."

He paused, glaring threateningly, yet Var displayed no fear. Rather he seemed inspired with a sudden confidence, as at the gaining of some important point.

"*Bien,* Duron," said he with some of his pent-up bitterness beginning to bite into his tone. "We will get down to business at once. You need not worry about our fists, or the pistol that I see bulging your pocket behind. Ours will be an affair of pirogues, and one well fitted to our calling. You have your ax, and I have mine. No weapons could be more deadly. Before us lies an open stretch that might have been made by nature for just such a meeting. We will start at either end, working our way through the stumps toward the middle. When close enough, we will engage with our axes until one of us is dead. Come, let us take our positions."

He started off as he finished speaking, but Duron thrust in before him, blocking his way. The hot angry blood had drained from the big man's cheeks, and his eyes were staring, as though with fear.

"Hold, Var," he cried unsteadily. "I can not fight that way. It is not a duel that you propose. It is murder. At the first blow we would both capsize, and what then?"

"Then it will be water for one of us instead of steel," replied Var calmly. "With your greater strength you should have the advantage, but I am satisfied. One good swing with my ax is all that I ask for. Come, let us begin before the light fades entirely."

But Duron, as he gazed from the other's hard resolute face into the still brown water, lost the last remnant of his false courage.

"No, no," he faltered. "I will not do it. It is irregular. It is insane. No one would fight so but a madman."

"Then you mean to tell me that, having given me the choice of weapons, you now refuse to fight?" asked Var evenly.

"Yes," mumbled the big man. "I at least have sense enough to refuse to be chopped down like a tree."

It was over and, had he been wise, Var would have departed without another word. Again he had judged his man correctly. Again he had planned well. As he had predicted, he might have retired from the encounter unhurt. But in a moment of triumph it is ever hard to hold one's peace, and Var, having scared his man into submission, now gave him an opportunity to regain his wits and craft.

"So, Duron," he mocked. "And who is the spoil-sport now? You, with your skill and strength, were willing enough to shoot me, or to beat me to death, but you lack the courage to face me upon more equal terms. I have always thought you a coward since our clash at Lonson's. Now I have proved it beyond doubt. *Bien,* go your way, and explain to the camp as best you can how you failed to kill me."

At the taunt Duron shrank back as from a blow. Hate, fear, shame, all struggled in his heavy countenance, but in his eyes there dawned a sudden look of cunning. Slowly his lids closed

down, his jaw thrust out, as the thought took shape in his crooked brain. Then he spoke, his voice gaining confidence with every word.

"Not so fast, my friend," he blustered. "This affair, at least, will not be settled by a trick with cards. If I have refused to be chopped down like a tree, I have said nothing so far about doing the same thing to you. But I can best explain this point with my ax. Come, I will give you the advantage of the farther end. Learn what you can of the stumps, and welcome."

At this I reached down for my gun, promising myself that, at his first unfair movement, I would give Duron a broken arm. But Var still knew his man.

"Very well," he agreed. "Only first throw your pistol overside that, upon my way, I may not learn something of bullets as well as stumps. I, myself, am unarmed."

Fully expecting the big man to end the matter with a quick shot at close range, I covered him with my gun as he drew his weapon. One move-

ment of its barrel toward Var, and I would have crippled him instantly. But Duron, without a moment's hesitation, flung the pistol far out into the water, where it sank amid a circle of widening rings. An instant later, paddling as steadily as though he were setting forth to his work, Var crossed the rings upon his way to the farther end.

What followed I will never forget. Even now I can see that narrow gash in the depths of the swamp, along which Var moved unevenly as he threaded a path through the squat black army of stumps. Not once did he glance behind him. Scarce an instant did he pause at the farther end before, turning, he raised his paddle. At the signal Duron set forth warily, and so the two closed in toward the middle where a gray shadowless patch of water reflected the last light of the vanished sun.

To me it seemed an eternity before those pirogues approached the middle. Gun in hand, I kept my eyes upon Duron, watching his every move. That he purposed some trick I knew, but

at the trick I could not guess. Again and again I asked myself—"What is his plan?"

Then the pirogues reached the unshadowed patch, the two; exchanging paddle for ax rose carefully to their feet, and I forgot my problem and all else in the terrible fascination of the moment.

That was something to remember, that dreadful pause while the pirogues drifted within reach. Var, straight and trim, stood frankly upright, his ax poised for his one wished-for blow. Duron, bent and hulking, leaned sullenly forward, his weapon held down at his side, as though for a mighty swing. Half mad with suspense, I too leaned far out of my pirogue, dropping my gun.

And then, while the two were still some few feet beyond reach, Duron's arm flashed suddenly up and outward. Snap went his wrist as the ax left his hand, flying arrow-like toward his enemy. It was a dangerous trick, since it left the player unarmed, but at that short distance Var

had no chance to dodge. Caught fairly upon the brow by the heavy steel head of the ax, he went down like a poled ox into the water.

With the first thud of the blow I snatched my gun, but already I was too late. Pursued by horror, and certain that the water would finish whatever he might have left undone, Duron wasted not an instant in flight. With a few swift strokes he crossed the stretch and, before I could aim, disappeared amid the blackness of the trees.

Dropping my gun again, I hurried forth from my hiding-place to the aid of Var. It was well that I did so, for he floated face downward, already half sunk in the water. Had I taken the time for my intended shot, he would most certainly have drowned. As it was, while dragging him upon a stump and from thence into my pirogue, I thought him dead. Later, on examination, I found that he still breathed. Upon his brow a great ragged gash marked the spot where the ax had plowed, but in the dusk I could not estimate the seriousness of the wound.

So, having stanched the blood as best I could, I put back at all speed to the camp. It was a weird endless journey, rendered especially difficult by the darkness and the added weight, and all the way the white face of Var stared up at me silently from the bottom of my pirogue.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HEARING

I CLEARED the swamp and made the camp where, upon my calling for aid, Ledet, Mamus and Trappey came hurrying forth from the cabin of the unmarried men. They had been anxious about their mate, these single ones, and had therefore not retired for the night. With their help I got Var quickly into his bunk and, by the light of the lamp, examined his wound.

As I have said, it was a long ragged gash which, for him, was lucky. Had the head of the ax struck fairly instead of plowing along, it would have smashed his skull, killing him instantly. As it was he had received a glancing blow which, although of terrible force, had left the bone unbroken. Now all depended on the

damage inside. Should he regain consciousness, I felt that he might have a good chance for recovery.

"He will live?" asked the swampers as I rose from my examination.

"Perhaps," said I. "Much depends upon the care that he receives. This is a case for Jeanne, and one of you must fetch her at once. Also we will need bandages and clear water."

In an instant Ledet and Mamus had departed outside, while Trappey, hurrying to a cupboard in the corner, drew forth the roll of linen that was kept for such an emergency. It was typical of these men that they wasted no time in further questioning. For the moment their one thought was of their comrade. When he was cared for their curiosity could have its turn.

Jeanne arrived, accompanied by her father, and hurried straight to the bunk. "*Dieu,*" she gasped at sight of Var's torn brow, but after that she made no sound. Quickly, yet carefully, she bathed the wound and swathed it over, while

the others hurried noiselessly about, anticipating her every demand. It was splendid, this swift wordless struggle against disaster. Never before had I seen such skill, such method, in those who fought the wild.

It was not until the last bandage had been placed and Jeanne, arising from her task, had seated herself beside the bunk, that the swampers sought an explanation of my arrival.

"Now, Bossu," said they, as they gathered about me.

And then, before I could reply, there came a knock at the door, and Voltaire Bon entered the room.

A man of few unnecessary words, he merely waited expectantly until Ledet, as the eldest, spoke up for his companions.

"It is Var," he explained. "He has been injured, and we have brought Jeanne to care for him."

Going over to the bunk, the leader gazed down impassively at the still figure that it held.

"My nephew did this?" he inquired after a moment.

"That is for Bossu, who brought him in, to say," answered Ledet. "He was about to tell us when you came."

Voltaire Bon turned toward myself with a marked absence of his usual courtesy.

"Well, Bossu?" he questioned bruskly.

"It was thus, M'sieu," said I and, as briefly as I could, I began my tale. The leader listened with the cold disfavor of one whose affairs have been meddled with from outside until, at the point where I hid myself at the clearing, he suddenly held up his hand.

"A moment, Bossu," he interrupted. "We will consider this affair as we go along. This meeting now—did you not understand with the rest that it was to be attended only by the two?"

It was hard, but I met his gaze.

"Yes, M'sieu," I answered.

"And knowing this you watched unseen?"

"Yes, M'sieu."

"Your reasons?"

"There were two, M'sieu. I mistrusted your nephew, and I had promised to be there."

"Your promise was to Marcel Var?"

At this, despite his authority, I flared up in defense of my friend.

"That is a useless question, as you must know, M'sieu," I retorted. "Had you heard me out, you would never have asked it."

A hard fierce light came into the leader's eyes, yet I knew that it was born not of what I had said, but of what I had done.

"Bossu," he began in a tone that was like the cut of a whip, "it is not pleasant for me thus publicly to rebuke a guest of this camp. Yet I am the leader and, when our laws are broken, even by an outsider, I can not let the matter pass unnoticed. Living as we do in this wilderness, it is not natural that we should know that repression of feeling which is found outside. The passions grow big in wide spaces, and when they break forth, to thwart them is to pervert them.

Hold your enemies apart, and in time one will stab the other in the back.

"Thus, when there are difficulties in this camp, I leave my men to settle them in their own way. If they wish seconds they are supplied. If not, it is 'hands off' for all. You may think me hard, cruel, what you will, but this is my law. When two men decide to fight you can only stop them by locking them up, and I, who am a feller of trees, lack the time to play jailer."

It was a long speech for the leader, but it served its purpose well.

Even while my brain condemned his inhumanity, my lips murmured an apology.

"If I have broken your laws, I am sorry, M'sieu," they said.

With one wave of his hand the leader swept the matter aside.

"Bien," said he. "Proceed with your tale."

So I went on to the bitter end, while the men breathed hard in their anger, and the furrows of age and disillusionment bit deep into the leader's

rugged face. Strong man though he was, I found it in my heart to pity him at that moment. Childless always, he had planned the future through his nephew, and now, word by word, I tumbled down his hopes, his ambitions, into the mire of disgrace.

When I had finished there came a silence during which the leader tugged absently at his flowing beard. Evidently he was thinking hard, and through the squareness of his jaw and the fierceness of his eyes one could see that his thoughts were not entirely those of despair. It was a fighting face, and, as I gazed at it, I knew that, just though he was, Voltaire Bon would not easily relinquish that which he had designed.

"Well, Bossu," said he finally. "This is hard to believe. It is bad enough to be a coward, but to fight unfairly—"

"There is also the race, M'sieu," I reminded him.

"True," he replied. "But a race is a race. That was a trick. This, if it is true, is murder."

"Then you doubt my word, M'sieu?" I asked hotly.

At this he made a gesture of annoyance.

"Come, come, Bossu," he remonstrated, "you have no cause for offense. Occupying the position that I do, I must ever doubt until I know. In such matter as this I must act not as myself, but as a judge, and there are two sides to every story. We have heard yours and now, late though it is, we will hear my nephew's. Ledet, you will bring him here at once."

Hurrying outside, Ledet returned almost immediately with Duron. The big man was fully dressed and it was evident that, since the first sounds of disturbance, he had hung about within easy reach. Also, through his flushed face and unsteady movements, it was still more evident that he had cheered his vigil with the spoils of his cache. Lurching inside, he cast one swift furtive glance toward the bunk, and then went over to his uncle.

"You sent for me, M'sieu?" he asked with the

sullenness that ever characterized his moments of fear.

The leader looked at him and then glanced quickly away, as though unwilling to see that which he read in the other's face.

"Blaise Duron," said he in the tone of one addressing an utter stranger, "you have been called here to answer certain charges that have been brought before me by Jean Le Bossu. He claims that he witnessed your encounter with Marcel Var, that, having given him the choice of weapons, you refused to fight. Further he declares that, having been shamed into an encounter with axes, you felled your opponent by hurling your ax at him from a distance, when it was understood that you were to engage hand to hand. Is this true?"

Duron did not hesitate in his reply. Evidently he had employed his time of waiting in preparing a defense built upon his knowledge of Var's return.

"It is a lie," he snarled, "a lie of that little

crooked devil who has ever hated me since once I tried to play a joke upon him. Did he not call against me in the race? And well he might since, through the meddling of this very Var, he was saved from the consequences of my fun."

He broke off to tell of his ruined joke, at the same time drawing his huge figure to its greatest height.

"Look at me, my friends," he continued, beating a fist against his enormous chest. "Consider my size and strength, and then ask yourselves if I need resort to any tricks in such an encounter. We fought with axes, it is true, but my blow was fair. If Var had no chance, it was his own choice, and I even warned him beforehand. 'You are mad,' I told him. 'In one stroke I will break down your defense.' "

It all sounded very plausible, coming as it did from the great hulking giant, and the men glanced at one another in doubt. Had I not seen, had I not known him for the coward that he was, I myself might have been deceived. As for the

leader, he also had seen in that one brief look of his, and the struggle raised within him by the false ring of truth in his nephew's reply, must have been terrible indeed. Yet, to look at him, one would have thought him only the impartial judge.

"So, Blaise Duron," said he. "That is all very well. It is easy enough to say, 'It is a lie.' The question is, can you prove it?"

It was the one chance for temporary escape and, as he uttered it, the leader's voice was harsh with self-contempt. He was a fair man, was Voltaire Bon, and this staying of justice was made all the harder in that it was done to serve his own ends.

Again Duron did not hesitate. Not for nothing had he attended similar hearings in former times. "As the accuser, Bossu is the one to prove, not myself," he answered.

The leader turned toward me, and this time it was he who experienced a difficulty in meeting eye with eye.

"This story of the joke at Lonson's?" he questioned. "It is true?"

"It is, M'sieu," I replied.

"And Var alone called out to you in warning?"

"He was the only one, M'sieu."

"It is so that you threatened my nephew afterward?"

"His words were not nice, M'sieu. I merely told him that, for all his size, I was well able to look out for myself."

The leader waited a moment.

"This Var?" he went on. "You had seen him before?"

"Once before, M'sieu."

"That was on the bayou?"

"On the bayou, M'sieu."

"And this time also he did you a service?"

Again my temper rose, despite my admiration. He was clever, this Voltaire Bon. His trap of words brought back a memory of the smooth clinging roots of the lilies.

"M'sieu," said I, "why waste breath on a mat-

ter that is of common knowledge? You know, as well as the rest, that, upon the occasion of our first meeting, Marcel Var pulled me out of the bayou."

The leader's nod was like a stroke, pinning something down.

"Bien," said he. And he added, after another wait: "Then what else have you to say, Bossu?"

"M'sieu," I answered him, "out there in the swamp there were but the three of us, and Var is beyond speech—perhaps for all time. Thus there remain only we two, and you have heard our different stories. One is true, and one is false. It is for you to choose between them."

It was a reply that left small chance for evasion, and Voltaire Bon was one who had ever delivered his decisions with the force and abruptness of a gunshot. Now, for the first time since I had known him, he betrayed indecision. Slowly, almost shamefully, his eyes left mine and sought the floor. His hand ceased its absent tugging, and began to comb with nervous fingers

amid the tangle of his beard. Then he spoke, his voice charged with an elusive hesitancy which, nevertheless, seemed to shout aloud this first weakening of his iron resolve.

"What you say is true, Bossu," he began, "but you have ignored two very important points. In the first place you have, upon your own showing, proved yourself a prejudiced witness. In the second it is not yet certain that Var will remain speechless for all time. Perhaps he will recover, he will remember, and in that event his story will be the deciding one. With this possibility in view, I can not choose fairly between you now. Therefore I deem it best to await the turn of events."

It was just and fair perhaps, but it was not the method of Voltaire Bon. As he turned away in token that, for the present at least, the hearing was closed, the swampers exchanged puzzled glances.

"Can this be our master?" their looks seemed to ask.

As for myself, despite all that had occurred, my feeling for the leader was still one of pity rather than of anger. He was an honest man, and I did not doubt that in time to come he would obey the commands of his conscience. If for the moment he recoiled from driving his nephew in disgrace from the camp, who could blame him? A little patience, and the truth would prevail.

At the door Voltaire Bon paused for one final backward glance. It was characteristic of him, that glance. His had been the last word. No slightest murmur of surprise or criticism had marked the utterance of his unusual decision. Yet he had sensed the unspoken reproof. Now, before stepping out into the night, he answered it with the unspoken challenge of his gaze.

"Come," his eyes commanded. "If you have anything to say to me, say it now before my face. Do not, like a pack of curs, go snapping at my heels after my back is turned."

A long silent moment passed before, with a

movement of grim disdain, the leader turned his head. He had won through the sheer power of his personality. He had even reversed his former triumphs of right over wrong.

And then, as the latch clicked beneath his hand, a voice broke the stillness of the room. It was a low scornful voice, yet it smote upon the tension like the crash of an exploding shell.

"Ah, you coward," it said.

CHAPTER XIX

JEANNE'S DEFIANCE

IT WAS Jeanne who spoke, and her words were received with the slow half-doubtful surprise of those who witness the breaking of a long established precedent. At Camp Bon, as throughout the swamp, the women were not allowed to comment upon the doings of the men. Their duties comprised those of the household, and beyond these they were not expected to go.

Yet, when once more the leader faced about, his expression was only one of fatherly reproof. Perhaps, still glowing from his recent triumph, he felt that he might deal lightly with the fault. Perhaps he realized that he had to do with no ordinary girl.

"Come, Jeanne," said he firmly yet kindly.

"For once you must control your temper. It is not nice, and it is not proper to call names. Also my nephew is no coward until he is proved absolutely to be one. As I have said—"

In one swift movement Jeanne left the bunk and advanced to the center of the room. Her face was very white and strained, but she held herself proudly erect, and her eyes blazed fearlessly beneath their level brows.

"Pardon, M'sieu," she interrupted evenly. "I did not call your nephew a coward. It was to you that I spoke."

Had she struck him full in the face, Voltaire Bon could not have been more astounded. His eyes stared. His mouth gaped. He was saved from being ridiculous only by the absolute sincerity of his amazement. A murmur of awe rippled among the swampers, like the whisper of wind in dry grass. Fagot, round-eyed with dismay, limped forward in trembling protest.

Then the leader recovered from his stupor, and his whole figure seemed to swell with the wrath

of his offended dignity. Slowly, majestically he advanced on the girl, and as he came, Fagot crept back into his place again. It was not, as I knew, that the old man was afraid. It was simply that it was beyond his power to deal with so incredible an affair.

The leader halted within arm's length of Jeanne, and fixed her with his gaze. He had himself well in hand by now, and when he spoke it was in a tone of ironic courtesy.

"So I am a coward, am I, Mademoiselle?" he began. "You have indeed made a discovery, and one that, were you a man, would cost you dear. As it is you will first explain, and then apologize. Woman though you are, you will answer to me for what you have said before I go."

Jeanne faced him defiantly, yet in her attitude there was also something of distress. She was like one who, having witnessed the destruction of an ideal, is divided between anger and regret.

"Very well, M'sieu," she replied, still in the same even voice. "I will explain, but after I am

through I do not think that you will require an apology of me. Always I have admired you as the greatest leader that I have ever known. It began when, as a child, I was wrongfully accused of a fault. You upheld me, and since that day you have been for me all that is just and true. And now, not five minutes ago—"

She paused, and her tone changed to one of sorrowful reproof.

"Ah, M'sieu, why did you do it?" she cried. "Why did you not keep your justice, your fairness untarnished to the end? Was your nephew worth it? Could any man's good name atone for this blot upon such a record as yours? Has your eye, your judgment failed you, that you must wait for the story of one who, in your heart, you hope will never speak; who, even if he lives, is sure to refuse redress at your hands? Come, M'sieu. Be the man that you have always been. Consider again the two who are before you. If you can not find the liar in a single glance, then indeed must you be blind."

That the leader was touched could not be doubted. He had received a great, a noble tribute and, had he been wholly worthy of it, he would have repaired his error then and there. But the strength of Voltaire Bon was not the strength of wisdom alone. It was also the strength of force, and he now made the mistake of employing it where force was of no avail.

"Enough, Mademoiselle," he thundered. "Having begun this affair, it is not necessary that you should end it. One would think that through modesty, if through nothing else—"

At the word the girl's temper blazed into a white heat.

"Modesty, M'sieu?" she echoed furiously. "Is it modesty to desert, when helpless, the one that you love? Ah, yes," she went on, unmindful now of the others in her anger, "I love Marcel Var as any other girl of pride, of mettle, would love him. Who else has placed his affections above your law? He has been the one man among all your followers. And yet, M'sieu, I have sought to do

that which you think my duty. Despite his sneers, his neglect, I have tried to love your nephew. Even after the race, had he played the man, I might have followed your desires. But one can not love, one can not hold to, a cheat, a coward and a murderer. One can only bring him to that justice which, in yourself, seems lacking for the first time."

Her voice broke, and her arm went out to point the guilty face of Duron.

"Look, M'sieu," she cried beseechingly. "If you are an honest man, look into your nephew's eyes, and tell me what you read there."

She was magnificent in the passion of her appeal, but Voltaire Bon, hopelessly committed to his policy of evasion, was bereft of a suitable reply. Enraged, humiliated, he lost for the moment the last vestige of his self-control. No longer was he the grave, yet forceful, adjuster of human affairs. He shouted, bullied. He became merely a savage old man who fought for an authority of which he knew himself to be unworthy.

"Be silent," he bellowed hoarsely. "Be silent before I forget that you are a woman. Am I the chit and you the leader, that I must listen longer to your insolence? If, through your youth, your sex, I have spoiled you, must I now suffer this intrusion into my affairs? No, Mademoiselle. You are in need of discipline and, like the rest, you shall receive it at my hands. You say that you love Var, that you will not hold to a cheat, a coward and a murderer! *Bien!* Now listen to what I have to say. First I shall prove the innocence of my nephew, and then you will marry him. Your promise, if not given, has been understood, and I shall hold you to it. And so, Mademoiselle, I bid you good night, and leave you to cool your temper till your wedding day."

He ceased, choking with rage, nor could he have realized fully what he had said. Otherwise he must have recognized the futility of issuing a command which, later on, he would be unable to enforce.

But as his fury had waxed, so had Jeanne's

temper waned. As I have said, her bursts of passion were ever short-lived, and now, through pity of her opponent, her anger had burned itself away. For the moment she was all her father's child, gentle, contrite, eager to make amends.

"Wait, M'sieu," she begged. "We can not part like this, you and I. If in what has passed I have forgotten the respect due your age and influence, I most humbly crave your pardon. For the rest, you will not be troubled long with either my father or myself. We shall only await the outcome of Marcel Var's injury before leaving the camp."

It was a peaceful ending to a stormy scene, and, furthermore, it opened up for the leader the one avenue of dignified escape. But Voltaire Bon, despite his long acquaintance with Jeanne, was ignorant of this side of the girl's nature. Accustomed always to final if unwilling obedience, he mistook this triumph of a generous heart for the submission of defeat.

"Enough, Mademoiselle," he ordered shortly.

"I do not now desire your apologies, but your obedience. As I have said so shall you do, and this within the month. Then perhaps you will appreciate that here, in my own camp, I am in command."

As he finished the leader's voice sank to its usual level of cold severity. He imagined not only that he had conquered, but that his victory was a double one. Through Jeanne herself he would hush all accusations against his nephew. Once the girl was safely married, the duel would be forgotten, and a further investigation rendered unnecessary.

It was a shrewd scheme, yet one palpable even to the fuddled brain of Blaise Duron. Thus far the big man had looked on in sodden silence, content to hide behind the defense of his uncle's authority. Now, however, the affair had reached a stage peculiar to his talents. A master bully himself, he could not forego a word in the final subjection of Jeanne. Thus, before the girl could reply, he lurched awkwardly before her.

"Come, Jeanne," he cried thickly. "Let us do as the leader commands. If I, who am the injured one, am willing, should you not be doubly so?"

He paused and, mistaking the girl's speechless fury for silent acceptance, reached out for her with one of his powerful arms.

"Come, Jeanne," he repeated. "Already we have waited too long."

What followed occurred with a swiftness impossible of description. At Duron's first move I had started forward, but I was not a moment too soon. There came a gasp, a flash of steel, a bellow of startled fear, as the bully hurled himself violently backward. Then I was clinging like death to Jeanne's upraised wrist, while Duron, flattened out against the wall, probed with uncertain fingers at his breast, as though to make sure that he was indeed unhurt.

Quickly, shudderingly, Jeanne dropped her arm. Then, as I loosed my hold, she swung about once more to face the leader. She still grasped

her great knife, and its heavy blade answered the flash of her eyes as she held it forth in warning.

"You see, M'sieu," she cautioned. "Take heed, then, and keep off your nephew. You have laughed at me for going about armed beneath your protection. Can you laugh again, M'sieu?"

But Voltaire Bon could not laugh. He could not even reply. He saw and understood, and departed without a word. Throughout his leadership he had conquered with justice. Now, when for the first time he fought without his life-long ally, he was beaten by a girl.

So ended that hearing at Camp Bon, its turmoil hushed into silence by a glint of cold steel.

The swampers, following their leader, slipped out in speechless awe. Duron, jerking himself together, crept furtively away. Fagot, a stunned huddle of bewilderment, muttered vaguely as he sought to grasp the significance of all that had occurred.

"*Bon Dieu, Bon Dieu,*" he repeated again and again.

But all these things passed unnoticed by Jeanne. Kneeling again beside the bunk, she sobbed her heart out into the coarse blankets, unconscious even of the touch of my hand upon her head.

I was glad that the others were not there to see. Perhaps they would not have understood that, after all, she was only a girl.

CHAPTER XX

WAITING

ALL that night Jeanne watched beside the bunk while I, at her command, sought such rest as I could in preparation for the morrow. When, after a brief nap, I awoke at sunrise, I found Var's condition unchanged. He still lay white and senseless as he might continue to do for days. I had seen such cases before, and I knew that we could only wait. Not until he regained consciousness, could we begin to hope.

"You see," said Jeanne. "All night there has not been so much as the flutter of an eyelid. I believe that I could stand it better if he were really dead."

She was fagged, and worn, and utterly disheartened. To have seen her, one would never

have imagined that, but a few hours before, she had defied Voltaire Bon himself. As in leaving she turned for a last glance toward the bunk, a faint wistful smile touched for an instant the drooping corners of her mouth. "Ah, Marcel, Marcel," it seemed to say, "am I to lose you now, after all that I have been through for your sake?"

"Have courage," I cheered her. "These hurts take time. And there is both youth and strength in Marcel's favor. We must fight to the end."

"Fight, Bossu!" she exclaimed. "If only I could. If only there was something to fight. But this waiting, with idle hands—"

She broke off, and added as she turned away: "Forgive me, Bossu. I will be patient, never fear. And remember that you are to call me if there is even the slightest change."

When she had gone I began my vigil, which was broken every now and then by the dropping in of Var's companions. It was Sunday, the day of homekeeping, of the accomplishment of in-

numerable unfinished tasks about the household. Yet, save for these brief visits of inquiry, Ledet and the others did not return to their cabin. They would get along outside, they said, until Var was either dead or better. Their noise might disturb the sick man, and, besides, it would not be pleasant for Jeanne to have them blundering about.

When they spoke of Jeanne it was in a voice of awed admiration, touched, so I thought, with a hint of shame. And yet I do not believe that they realized until that morning that they had looked silently on while the girl was bullied beyond human endurance. The affair had been brief, and one does not easily break a long established discipline. Now that they knew they were giving up their cabin to make amends.

As the day wore on the attitude of the camp declared itself. Voltaire Bon kept indoors, denying himself to every one. He might be planning some supreme act of authority. He might be hiding his defeat from his little world. None could tell.

Blaise Duron, upon the other hand, was about everywhere. Having sought solace throughout the night from the neck of a bottle, he had become the most dangerous of human creatures—a drunken coward. Heavily armed, obscenely profane, he staggered from one end of the camp to the other, challenging each one he met to deny his innocence. Since Var was helpless, let some one else take up his quarrel. That was what he, Blaise Duron, wished above all things. Then perhaps folk would know that he was the man he claimed to be.

As for Jeanne, he swore that, though she bristled with knives like a porcupine, he would marry her within the month. She had spirit, had Jeanne, and he liked spirit. He had spirit himself, as the girl would learn the first time she came within reach of him. So Duron went on throughout the day. Men pitied him, but avoided him. For once he was in a condition to make good his bluster, and none felt willing to become the victim of his maudlin courage.

Among the rest at Camp Bon opinion was divided, the women declaring for Jeanne, the men, for the most part, upholding the leader. It was the eternal struggle of sex against sex intensified by the leisure of the Sabbath. A spirit of unrest pervaded the camp, finding expression in endless bitter argument.

Thus the hours passed until, at dusk, Jeanne returned to relieve me. The girl seemed fresher and brighter, but her eyes were hard. Thus far she had made no mention of her defiance of the leader, and now I knew that she would remain silent. She had had her say, and she was finished. Of sympathy she was not in need.

Fagot also was, for the first time, uncommunicative. He had tried once or twice to speak to me, but had given up in despair. He was still stunned.

As for myself, I found little sleep that second night. By now I had become genuinely attached to Fagot and Jeanne, and I could not but perceive the difficulty, the impossibility of their situation.

For the moment the one was helpless, the other defiant, and all the while the tension of the camp was increasing. Soon there would come a snap, and then—. But I could only hope that the snap would be avoided by departure. Had it not been for Var, I would have insisted that the two go out at once, while I remained behind to arrange for their effects.

Next morning, when I arose for my watch, I again found a weary haggard Jeanne. Var continued the same, and the girl, if possible, was even more hopeless than before. Yet she retired to her rest obediently enough. It promised to be a long siege and, through former experience, she was forced to recognize the necessity of saving herself.

Therefore I was much surprised when, that afternoon, Jeanne returned. She was dressed in rough clothes, and, in addition to her heavy knife, she wore her leather gauntlets.

"I am off to the swamp, Bossu," she announced dully. "I can not sleep, and were I to

take your place now I would go mad. Somehow at night it is not so terrible. Then it is more like a real death than a living one."

"You will take my pirogue?" I suggested.

She shook her head, holding out her gauntleted hands.

"I am going to work, Bossu," she returned. "This is Monday, and the moss will not come to us. Also it will cost us to move. We can sell what we leave behind."

It was the old unanswerable argument of necessity. I could only warn where I wished to forbid.

"*Bien,*" said I. "But you will stay clear of the men? You will watch out for—"

Jeanne interrupted hastily as though to avoid the name.

"Ah, yes, of course, Bossu," she assured me. "I only want to be let alone for the little time that I am here."

I watched her go with a vague sense of foreboding. Despite her mettle, she was only a young

headstrong girl, and somewhere in that dark tangle of cypress lurked Blaise Duron. Insensible at sunrise, he had not gone with the others. At noon, however, he had awakened and, having fortified himself with liquor, had set out to join his companions. I had watched him from the window as, splashing and rocking, he had made his way toward the swamp.

That afternoon was one of the longest that I have ever known. It was terribly hot and still, and the minutes dragged interminably. As I sat there, enveloped by the depression of Var's living death, it was not long before I built up my vague foreboding into a certain and frightful catastrophe. Now, when it was too late, I saw that I had been mad to let Jeanne go. I should have held her back, by force if necessary. Of course she would meet Duron. It was one of those things arranged by fate from the beginning of time. Though they had all the world to move about in, the two must inevitably collide. And Duron was still drunk, and Jeanne had her great

knife. I could picture them as they came together. Duron, the maudlin braggart, would not hesitate to make good his boast. The girl's very weakness would embolden him.

And there was Jeanne with her pride and temper. She was not one to threaten idly. Also she was quick and sure. Let the big man reach out for her a second time with his mighty arm—.

Thus I thought until I had all but worked myself into a frenzy. Then, when it lacked but a little to sunset, Jeanne came hurrying in as an answer to my fears.

"Out with you, Bossu," she cried cheerily. "You look as though you had seen a ghost. Take your pirogue while the light lasts, and cross to the swamp. It is what you need. Go, Bossu. Go at once. I am not tired, and I will stand my watch just as I am."

"Then you have not met Duron?" I questioned, still held by my thoughts.

"Met him?" she echoed. "Why, no, Bossu. Had I done so, I would have returned at once.

But go, as I have said. I tell you that the grip of the paddle, the slide of the water, will do you more good than all the sleep in the world."

That she spoke truly was evidenced by herself.

It was wonderful the change that had been wrought in her by that brief time of toil. There was hope in her eyes, a flush on her cheek. She was the Jeanne of a week before.

I could only stare my relief and gratitude. Somehow I felt as though a crisis had been passed. I had looked forward to this Monday as the crucial day, and now I felt that matters would begin to mend. Voltaire Bon had not struck. Blaise Duron must, of a necessity, cease his drinking. As in the case of Jeanne, all would become normal once more through the sanity of accustomed labor.

CHAPTER XXI

IN THE MOONLIGHT

THAT night I was in high spirits. At supper, returning from an hour of idle paddling, I talked in so cheerful a strain that even Fagot began to take heart. Yes, it would be all right, he declared. One could never be sure in matters of love. Though the old planned, the young must have their way. Surely the leader would see this. He was a just man. Also he had once been young himself.

Of course it would not do to stay on at Camp Bon. That would be unpleasant for every one. Come what might he, Fagot, would leave with Jeanne. But it must be in friendship. That much, at least, was due the kindness of Voltaire Bon.

Supper over, we sat out and smoked before the cabin of the unmarried men. True, it was my time for sleep, but I had determined that, despite her remonstrances, I would relieve Jeanne for the first half of the night.

Never will I forget the peace, the beauty of that hour. A welcome breeze had sprung up at dusk, and above the dark ramparts of the swamp rose a round white moon. Already her beams were wiping away the shadows from the water, leaving only the ripples with their etching of silver and black. Fagot, timidly confident, rumbled vague plans through the smoke of his cigarette. He would return to the woods. Perhaps, even, he could get back his old home. At all events there would be no lack of moss for his trade.

Then came Ledet and the others, inquiring of Var, complaining of the hardships of the day. The swamp had been terrible, they said, and the leader had driven them unmercifully. To their heat and fatigue had been added the unjust burden of his resentment. Of Duron they knew lit-

tle. He had arrived at midday, too drunk to work, and had been ordered off by his uncle. None knew where he had gone, nor had he come out with the rest. It would be a good thing if he and his bottle were to remain inside forever.

Thus they rambled on to fall presently silent, hushed by the beauty of the night.

It was Trappey who finally broke the spell by pointing out toward the water.

"See," said he. "Duron will at least spend the night inside. The current has robbed him."

I looked and there, sure enough, was the vagrant pirogue, drifting in across the pale reach of moonlit water.

Ledet growled impatiently.

"The drunken dog. It would serve him right were he to lose her. Nevertheless," he added aloud, "since you have discovered her, Trappey, you may bring her in. Then we will go to bed."

But Trappey, being already half asleep, was in no mood for unnecessary effort.

"There is no need," he answered. "With this

breeze and the current, she can not miss us. When she lands I will moor her."

So Trappey waited while the pirogue floated ever nearer, the one dark blot upon that rippling flood of silver. Then, when she had all but reached the shore, he departed grumbling toward the landings. I watched him idly as, splashing out, he caught the runaway craft; nor did I guess at all what his action involved. Indeed, even after he had hailed his companions, I did not suspect.

"Hola, up there," he called. "Duron is here also, dead drunk in the bottom. Lend a hand some of you that we may carry him home."

We rose, all of us, and Ledet, since it was dark in the shadows, reached down a lantern. Fagot, still concerned with his plans, turned muttering away toward his cabin. With a word of good night the swampers set off, their light a mere spark in the great white wash of radiance. Jeanne stirred inside and I, suddenly mindful of my neglect, hastened to relieve her.

And then, before I could reach the door, there came from the direction of the landing the sound of one in mortal dread. It was not loud, it was scarce a cry, yet it broke upon the still glory of that night as with the shout of many voices.

I think that I must have known upon the instant. At all events, before the sound had ceased to tremble upon the air, I was running blindly after the swampers. I caught them before they arrived. Indeed, it was with the lantern snatched from Ledet's hand that I made certain that which Trappey had only begun to suspect.

Blaise Duron lay asprawl in the bottom of his pirogue, a limp huddled mass, all dripping with blood and water. He had fallen upon his face—with his arms reached stiffly outward—and just below the broad spread of his shoulders, there gaped a single wound. It was a huge, a terrible wound—as from the thrust of some peculiarly heavy blade—and it went almost through. No ordinary knife could have made it. Even by the dim light of the lantern that much was plain.

They turned him over, not without difficulty, for one hand had fastened itself to the pirogue's side. The other, as it flopped woodenly into view, clutched a dark, crumpled object within its final grasp.

There was no need to loose the gripping fingers. The object was only too well known. It was one of the leather gauntlets that Jeanne always wore at her work in the swamp.

This much I saw before, sick with horror, I turned away. I did not wait for the conjectures of the men. I could neither have plead nor defended, even had it been of any use. I was overwhelmed by the monstrous, savage cruelty of that which must inevitably come. And yet, within the chaos of my mind, there was not the slightest suspicion against Jeanne's innocence. Had I not seen her upon her return? Had she not told me that she had not met Duron in the swamp?

Half stupefied, I stumbled up from the landings. For the moment I was beside myself. I

had an impulse to seize Jeanne, to spring into my pirogue and to paddle madly away. I wished to escape from Camp Bon, from life itself.

Then a hand fell upon my shoulder, and a voice spoke into my ear, a strong hushed voice that was charged with the very essence of command.

"Quick, Bossu, if you are with me," it said. "There is not a moment to lose."

It was Fagot, but such a Fagot as I had never known. Cool, resolute, masterful, he quelled the panic of my thoughts with the power of his new-found personality. Seizing my arm he set off at a fast limping trot, while I followed him with the passive obedience of a child. I felt no surprise. I accepted without marveling. It seemed of a piece with the grotesque madness of that dreadful moment.

At the cabin Fagot loosed his hold of me, and hurried within. Jeanne sat in her usual place beside the bunk, but he called her to him with a sharp command.

"Quick! Jeanne," he ordered. "You must come home with me at once. There is not a moment to lose."

"But what of Marcel?" began the girl.

"He must wait," Fagot answered shortly. "We have no place now for a sick man. When we are safe I will explain."

Even while speaking he bundled Jeanne outside, and strode away with her toward his cabin. Despite his limp he strode, and his carriage was that of a good twenty years before. The old man was reborn. He had become heroic in his supreme hour of need.

CHAPTER XXII

FAGOT TAKES COMMAND

ONCE inside his own home, Fagot wasted no time. First he locked and barred the door. Next, seizing Jeanne by the shoulders, he thrust her out at arm's length where, while questioning her, he could look into her eyes. When he spoke it was with a crispness strangely ill suited to his loudness of voice.

"Quick, Jeanne," he repeated. "I must know the truth. Duron has just drifted in dead from the swamp. He came in the bottom of his pirogue, and he has been stabbed in the back. You killed him?"

The girl went ghastly white, but her eyes held true. Also she made no show of useless indignation.

"No, I did not kill him," she answered simply, yet convincingly.

At once Fagot released her. He knew his daughter, and he was satisfied.

"So," said he. "That is what I thought, although it might be better if you had killed him. Then you would have something to pay for. As it is, you will pay for nothing."

"You mean that I—I will be suspected?" faltered Jeanne.

Fagot uttered what was perhaps a short laugh. It sounded more like a cry of pain.

"Suspected?" he echoed bitterly. "No, Jeanne, it is worse than that. Already you are damned as surely as though you had been tried and found guilty by all the judges in the world. You went to the swamp this afternoon, and your glove was found clasped in Duron's hand."

"I lost it," put in the girl. "I hung it for a moment upon the edge of the boat while I freed my pole, and the current carried it away. As for my knife—" She broke off and, drawing

the weapon added: "As you can see, it is quite clean. Also it has never for a moment been out of my sight."

Fagot waved the interruption impatiently aside.

"I know, I know," said he. "Nevertheless this will not serve you. They would only laugh at your story. No, no, Jeanne, you are trapped. It all fits in too well together. First you threatened, then you went armed to the swamp. Now this dead drunkard drifts in with a gash in his back beyond the power of any knife among us, save only your own. You should see that gash, Jeanne. They will not need the glove."

Jeanne nodded with the calm weariness of despair. She had had a long hard fight, and now, through a series of well-nigh impossible circumstances, Fate had tricked her into defeat. She asked no questions. It was all too terribly plain.

"*Bien,*" said she quietly. "Then I can only tell them that I am innocent, as did Jean Pierre."

At the name Fagot's face became twisted with a savageness of which I would have deemed him incapable.

"Ah, no, Jeanne," he snarled. "You will not tell them that; nor will you tell them anything. This time I, the father, will do the talking. You remember what I said at the death of my son, how I found that I had neglected my duty? I little thought that the necessity would be mine once more. Now that it has come, I know what to do. As for yourself, you have only to remain silent and obey."

Out of Jeanne's dull apathy his words aroused a faint flicker of protest. It was a pitiful effort, half-hearted and short-lived. Evidently, having in some past hour known the Fagot who was now before her, the girl recognized the futility of argument.

"And what of Marcel?" she began. "Who will look after—"

Fagot stopped her with a shout.

"Marcel must take his chance," he roared.

"Anyhow he can mean nothing to you now. And if he recovers, you will mean worse than nothing to him. He will see only the blood upon your hands. Come, let us prepare for all that is left to us. Quick now with the possibilities of the supplies."

It was brutally cruel, but it had its effect. Jeanne could not help but understand. Without a word she turned to the cupboard where the food was stored.

"With care there should be enough for one week," she announced after a brief examination. Her voice was dull, yet free from bitterness. With the swift fatalism of our race, she was already resigned.

Fagot uttered a growl of relief.

"That will more than suffice," he replied. "And now for water. There is only the kettle outside. It is not large, but it is all that we have. Come, Bossu."

All that I have described occurred with the swiftness of desperation. Indeed, as I followed

Fagot through the door and around the cabin, I had scarce regained my composure. Almost from the first I had sensed his determination, yet, despite its terrible, futile madness, there had been no chance to intervene. Now as, stooping, he began to tug the kettle from its support of three half bricks, I began my protest.

"Hold, Fagot," said I. "What are you preparing to do?"

Still employed with his tugging, he glanced up at me with a look of calm but absolute purpose. He was like a man going about some necessary piece of work, a distasteful piece, perhaps, but one not without a certain amount of interest.

"I am going to hold them off, Bossu. There is nothing else to do. In front lie clear water and a full moon. Behind is impenetrable swamp. There is no chance for escape."

"But, Fagot," I cried, "have you considered the uselessness, the cruelty of what you propose? You can not hold them off for long. After you are dead, to whom will Jeanne turn?"

At this he sprang upright, his face convulsed with an expression half of fury, half of despair. I shrank from him involuntarily, but he came at me and gripped me by the shoulders as, a while before, he had seized Jeanne. Then, thrusting his face close to my own, he spoke, as though his words were blows which he wished to deliver at short range.

"Drop that, Bossu," he ordered fiercely. "It is the one thing that I am trying to forget. Also do not begin about Jeanne's vindication by the law. They fooled me that way with my son, but they will not fool me again. For the rest, I am in command here, and my mind is made up. As much as I love you I will endure no second word of argument. If the affair is so desperate, steer clear of it. Otherwise keep your thoughts to yourself and obey. Come now, decide. Any moment they may be here."

I did not reply in words. I had been beaten in that line of attack, and I knew that a second attempt would be as ineffectual as it would prove

disastrous. As Fagot stooped again for the kettle, I stooped with him, thus declaring myself according to his command. "So, Bossu," he gasped appreciatively, as we struggled off with our burden. "I might have known."

Having deposited our load inside, Fagot caught the water pail from off its shelf.

"You keep watch while I fill up, Bossu," he directed. "If they come, do not let them get beyond the bottom step of the porch. For the moment that is my dead line."

It was what I had hoped for and, hardly was he through the door, before I turned to Jeanne.

"Well?" I burst out. "You are going to let him do it?"

The girl shrugged hopelessly.

"What would you have me do?" she retorted. "He is determined, as he has been determined for years, and nothing can move him. I have seen him before, and I know. After Jean Pierre's death he—" She paused, shuddering as at some terrible recollection.

"Ah, Bossu," she went on, "if you had seen what I have, you would understand. I was little then, but I will never forget. For weeks, for months, he was like one mad. He upbraided, he reviled himself, for having failed in his duty to his son. 'I should have held them off, I should never have delivered him into their hands,' was his one cry through all those dark days and nights. Now that this has come, he will not fail a second time in what he thinks his duty. He is mad again, but there is nothing to do."

She fell silent as Fagot hurried in with a pail of water; nor, after he departed, did I continue my protest. I understood now as well as she. Through her words had been explained this startling transformation of a timid irresolute old man into a being of relentless purpose.

If before Fagot had cowered away from his daughter's mere defiance, it had been because he had grappled with the inconceivable. He had been stunned by unfamiliarity. Now, through bitter experience, he knew unfailingly what to do.

It was no wonder that, after all his endless, tortured rehearsals of the tragedy of Jeanne Pierre, he should find himself part perfect in his present rôle.

Defeated a second time, I sat mute and helpless until, when the kettle was almost full, Fagot came in with a rush. Thrusting me his pail, he sprang to the corner where leaned his gun, a huge fowling piece with a bore like that of a small cannon. This he loaded with some special shells snatched from the shelf above the open fire, after which he returned and barred the door. Then he blew out the light.

"They are coming, Bossu," he announced. "In one way at least, the moon is in our favor. To find cover they must halt out of range."

I listened and, from beyond the door, I caught the tramp and shuffle of the advancing men. Grimly silent, Fagot clutched his great gun and awaited their approach. Going to the one window in front, I peered outside.

All were there from Voltaire Bon, walking in

front, to young Trappey who, apparently still dazed by his discovery, stumbled along in the rear. They walked slowly, gravely, like men bent upon some solemn and righteous errand, and their hands were empty of weapons of any kind.

"There is no danger for the moment, Fagot," said I. "All are unarmed."

"So," he returned, and after a moment's thought unbarred the door. Then, as the men reached the open space before the cabin and, halting, allowed Voltaire Bon to advance, he stepped out, gun in hand, upon the porch. By now the leader had reached the foot of the steps, and there Fagot stopped him with a curt command.

"That is close enough," he warned. "Just now it is my dead line."

The situation was explained. Had Voltaire Bon been present at the cabin for the past half-hour, he could not have been better informed of Fagot's determination. Yet the leader remained passive. His face looked white and drawn in

the moonlight, and his great rugged frame was stooped and bowed as beneath some heavy burden. Evidently, through the death of his nephew, he had been hit hard.

"Come, Fagot," he reproved, "this is no way to act. Would you make a bad affair worse? *Dieu,* it is terrible enough as it is. It has taken the life out of me."

"And now you have come to take the life out of my girl, eh?" snarled Fagot.

The leader raised his hand, the great gnarled hand with which, for years, he had ruled his world. Sore stricken though he was, this unconscious gesture of his authority could not be denied.

"No, Fagot," he answered. "I do not seek your daughter's life, although the proof of her guilt is overwhelming. This affair is beyond my justice. It is for the law. I have only come to tell you that to-morrow Jeanne must be taken to the proper authorities. You may accompany her and, save for an escort, there will be no restraint. I

am sorry for you, Fagot, believe me. I am willing to do what I can. Surely you can not expect more?"

It was a fair, a generous offer, and one that might have appealed to any man. But Fagot was no longer a man. He was like some maddened animal, at bay, and fighting for its young. In the pause that followed he laughed harshly, thrusting out his enormous gun.

"Here is what I expect, Voltaire Bon," he shouted. "Here is what is in store for the first one of you who comes armed within range. I have two barrels of buckshot, and the old gun scatters wide. Now that I have warned you, you may come after my daughter whenever you are of a mind to. As well now as later."

He ceased abruptly, his gun held ready for instant use. One week before, buckshot or no buckshot, the leader would have gone up those steps without hesitation. Now, however, he turned back to his followers. There ensued a low-pitched conversation, which Fagot endured

with silent contempt. Then the leader returned to the dead line.

"Fagot," he announced, "since you are mad, it is doubly necessary that I should remain sane. My men are with me, and, even as you must know, we could storm this cabin and take your daughter before morning. This, however, we will not do. Matters are bad enough already without having your blood upon our hands. Therefore Ledet will depart at once for the nearest officer of the law, and until he is here you and yours will remain unmolested. You may come and go as you please about the camp, only you will not be allowed to escape. For the rest, I should advise you to come to your senses before the officer arrives. He will not be so patient as myself."

The interview was ended; nor strangely enough, had it involved any discussion of Jeanne's innocence or guilt. The leader was sure, Fagot indifferent. The men, shocked by the horror of the crime, were only too ready to welcome the intervention of the law.

As the little crowd dispersed, I experienced an acute feeling of desertion. Before I had at least been assured of the sympathy of the unmarried men. Now all were against my cause.

As for this cause, I now considered its every phase, lingering in the coolness of the porch long after Fagot has returned inside. Slowly, carefully, I went over each detail of the terrible affair, and as I proceeded, such gleams of hope as might have shone before, were soon blotted out by a dark cloud of circumstance. The situation, desperate enough at first, now seemed hopeless. For the moment it was not a question of Jeanne. She could wait. First, Fagot must be saved from his own madness, and I alone could save him.

But how to do it? That was the problem. The camp was against me. I could not look for help even in my own ranks. I was entirely alone, and if Ledet made for Bayou Jules, the nearest settlement, I would have less than twelve hours of daylight to work in. Of all the puzzles with

which I had been faced it was the hardest, yet I persevered until finally I arrived at my decision.

Jeanne I determined not to question. In her few brief words to her father she had told all her story, and any further inquiries from myself might suggest a suspicion of guilt. At least she should not be denied such comfort as she might glean from the thought of my belief in her.

Fagot I had already decided to leave strictly alone. Thoroughly desperate as he was, a word of protest or argument would most certainly cause him to banish me from the cabin. If all else failed, however, I promised myself that, at the last moment, I would have my try at getting his gun away from him.

In the meantime but one course lay open to me. If I could not work through Fagot, I must work through Voltaire Bon. Also, since the leader was convinced of Jeanne's guilt, I could only move him with the proof of her innocence. I must find that proof, and the discovery must

be made in those few hours of daylight that lay before me.

To the identity of the real murderer I paid little heed beyond assuring myself of the innocence of the entire camp. Blaise Duron, through his overbearing ways, must have made innumerable enemies outside, any one of whom might have chosen this means of revenge. True, most men under such circumstances would have preferred a gun to a knife and, even with this unusual substitution accounted for, there remained the explanation of that enormous wound.

To go farther upon this road meant only increased confusion, and I resolutely held myself to my original purpose. If I proved Jeanne's innocence undeniably, my own work was done. As for the balance of the trail, I could leave that to be nosed out by the blood-hounds of the law.

"Come, Bossu," I said to myself as I arose for bed. "You must not lose your grip again. You have done so once to-night, and it has cost you much evidence which is now hopelessly de-

stroyed. Had you stayed by Duron's body, had you examined it before it was disturbed, you might already have an answer to your question. From now on you must keep your courage, you must not think of defeat. A good night's sleep, a clear brain at dawn and, as you have won before, so will you win again. What if the time is short? Your success will depend on an instant's discovery."

Thus I heartened myself and, even as I turned away, a dark slender shape broke the calm silver of the water, bound outside. The affair had begun with pirogues. Now, through Ledet's departure, it promised to end in the same manner. Truly it was a tragedy of the swamp.

CHAPTER XXIII

VOLTAIRE BON'S THEORY

THAT night, through sheer weariness, I slept well. Arising to a clear dawn, I began my day by having a brief understanding with Fagot. Worn out like myself, and secure in Voltaire Bon's promise of immunity, the old man had slept also, but the rest had only served to increase his fixity of purpose. Refreshed, he merely felt the better able to stand off his enemies.

"Fagot," said I, "as I showed by my actions last night, I am with you to the end. For the present, however, I mean to trust to my wits rather than to force of arms. Once, jokingly, I told you that such talents as I was possessed of, were at Jeanne's command. Now the jest has

become a stern necessity. As you know, your daughter is innocent, and the proof of that innocence lies somewhere hereabouts. If possible, I am going to find it."

His gratitude was one of the most pitiful things that I have ever known. It shone through his mask of grimness, of fierce despair, like a light from that other Fagot who yet lurked somewhere within his tortured soul.

"Ah, Bossu," he cried, "I will not try to thank you. I can only say that you are a man. It is wrong, perhaps, that you should cast your lot with ours, yet how can I refuse your aid? My back is against the wall, and I can not strike away the one friendly hand that reaches out toward me. As for your search, God grant that you are successful, as you have been before. For myself, I can only prove my daughter's innocence with my gun."

At the sound of our voices Jeanne had come in from her little closetlike room in the rear. Evidently she had found scant rest, yet there was

nothing listless about her. Indeed, all the time that we talked she paced restlessly from one side of the cabin to the other, her whole being alive with a species of fierce restraint. She was like some wild creature that has been trapped and separated from its mate.

As I bade her farewell she suddenly seized me, staring deep into my eyes. In her look there were pain and impatience, together with a sad supplication. Of doubt or of fear, I saw no faintest trace.

"You will see Marcel?" she pleaded. "You will find out just how he is? I would go myself, but my father will not allow it."

"Rest assured, Jeanne," I soothed her. "I will most certainly see him."

"You will not forget, Bossu?" she insisted. "You will not forget?"

"I will not forget," said I. "You may depend upon me."

"So," she murmured, and turned back to her little room.

That was all. Despite my words to Fagot, she had shown not the slightest interest in my quest. As well might I have departed on some small errand of my own. Our women are like that. When they love, they love hard.

Going at once to Voltaire Bon's cabin, I found him alone and at ease. That day the cypress rested in peace. Until Fagot's affair was settled, there would be no work at the camp.

The leader's face still bore its marks of shock and grief, but upon it there was now stamped an expression of bitter relentlessness that boded ill for my mission. Evidently he had hardened during the night.

"Well, Bossu?" he questioned sternly, when I stood before him. "Has that madman sent you to say that he has returned to reason?"

"No, M'sieu," I replied. "In that event he would have come himself. I am here to ask your assistance in certain investigations through which I hope to establish Jeanne's innocence before it is too late."

The leader regarded me with a strange mixture of impatience and contempt.

"So that is it, eh?" he scoffed. "If you will take my advice, you will return whence you came and employ your efforts in bringing Fagot back to his senses. Ledet should be here by six o'clock at the latest, and with him will come Sheriff Dalbor who, for the moment, has jurisdiction at Bayou Jules. Perhaps you have heard of Dalbor? He will do no parleying. Also my men have been unanimous in their offer to act as deputies."

I could not at once reply. Now indeed was my time cut down to the last second. I had hoped that, should Ledet arrive late, the assault would be postponed until the following morning. With Dalbor there would not be a moment lost. Only too well had I heard of him. Once refused his prisoner, I knew that he would go after her immediately, even though it were the blackest hour of the night. I thought of those stores estimated, that kettle filled, against a long siege. Poor

Fagot! He could do as well with a drop and a crust.

"So," said the leader, who still continued to regard me. "You realize your waste of time? Then return and follow the only course left open to you. You have a quick tongue, and even the worst affairs look better in the sunlight."

He paused and continued in a kindlier tone—"Believe me, Bossu, I appreciate your talents of investigation. I have heard of you before, and I know that you have done some clever things. This affair, however, is too certain. There is nothing to find. Take even such evidence as you can accumulate without effort.

"Jeanne flouts my nephew for Var, and the two have a duel in which you, yourself, claim an unfair stroke. In the hearing that follows Jeanne replies to my nephew's overtures of friendship with naked steel, all but committing the murder then and there. Next day, being under the influence of liquor, my nephew declares that he will have Jeanne even though, to use his own words,

she bristles with knives like a porcupine. The day after that he departs, still drunk, to the swamp; being followed by Jeanne who, as can be proved, was armed with her big knife. That night my nephew drifts in dead in his pirogue, with a wound in his back peculiar to that knife, and with one of Jeanne's gloves gripped in his hand.

"So there you are, Bossu, and to myself and the rest the crime is as plain as though it had been committed publicly. Jeanne met my nephew in the swamp and he, being still maudlin, sought to make good his boast of the day before. As he seized her she reached for her knife, and he, realizing her intention, caught at her hand. He missed the hand but won the glove and, while puzzled and stupid he considered his prize, Jeanne repeated her motion and stabbed him in the back. Afterward, leaving him as he fell, she made her escape. Come, Bossu. You see it now, do you not? Otherwise you are blind."

I shook my head.

"No, M'sieu," I replied. "I do not see it. The

strength of such evidence as you have recited I grant you. Your theory of the crime, however, is as impossible as it is ridiculous."

I had counted upon the effect of my words, and I was not disappointed. The leader flushed angrily. His hands gripped the arms of his chair. At least I had disturbed the calmness of his absolute assurance.

"So I am ridiculous, am I?" he growled. "Then what is your theory, M'sieu Jean Le Bossu? Perhaps, with your cleverness, you have found out already what actually occurred?"

I again shook my head.

"No, M'sieu," I repeated. "So far I have found out nothing. As for my theory, I have none, save that I am as certain of Jeanne's innocence as I am that she speaks the truth when she says that she dropped her glove in the swamp. Last night I unfortunately became demoralized, and so lost the opportunity to examine the body before it was moved. Therefore I have no external evidence to go upon, save only a certain bit

of which I will inform you later. Your version of the affair, however, falls down before the mere test of common sense.

"First you say that Jeanne stabbed your nephew at the moment of his seizing her. In that event she did so from in front, and over his shoulder, a feat truly impossible when you consider the length and broadness of her blade, and Duron's great size. If you would make an experiment, shape a board to the likeness of Jeanne's knife and try, in a similar manner, to stab even a smaller man. Should he fail to halt your stroke before it begins to descend, I will freely acknowledge all that you claim. If your nephew stopped Jeanne the first time, why not the second? Also what was he doing while she slowly forced her great blade almost through him?

"In the second place you say that Jeanne left him where he fell. As he arrived thoroughly soaked all over, he evidently fell into the water. How then did he get back into the pirogue again?

Your only answer is that Jeanne put him there which, on account of his weight, is ridiculous."

The leader stirred uneasily in his chair. He was suffering from a gradual loss of self-confidence.

"I see, Bossu," he admitted. "As they say, you are no fool. Following your reasoning then, it is plain that Jeanne slipped up behind him, and stabbed him as he sat in his pirogue. Thus, unnoticed, she had ample time and swing in which to drive her great knife through his back. Dying instantly, he was found just as he fell."

"That will not do either, M'sieu," I contradicted. "In that event he would have been found doubled up in the forward part of the pirogue where he had pitched from his seat. Also there are his soaked clothes to explain. No, he fell in the water, and we return to my original question. How did he get back into the pirogue again?"

By now the leader's uneasiness had changed to a sullen anger that was strangely reminiscent of Blaise Duron himself.

"Dieu," he shouted. "You are like a mosquito with your one whining question. How then *did* he get back into the pirogue?"

"He got into it himself, and after he was injured, M'sieu," I answered. "This I know through that one bit of evidence gleaned from the demoralization of last night. Your nephew was a strong man, and hard to kill. After he was struck he managed to reach his pirogue, and to grasp it with one hand while he rolled into it. As he reached the bottom he died. His position when found proves this beyond a doubt. Ask Ledet or any of the others who saw him first, and they will bear me out in what I say. His attitude was too natural. It could not have been arranged after death by any human hand."

"And the glove?" demanded the leader, as if in sudden remembrance.

"That is a question that I fear will never be answered, M'sieu," I replied. "Perhaps he had just found it. Perhaps, having stored it in his blouse for safe-keeping, he clutched it in his struggle to

find his wound. Perhaps he really loved Jeanne and drew it forth at the last moment to ease the passing of his soul."

The leader growled a dissent.

"Perhaps will not do, Bossu," said he. "Nevertheless you make a good case of it," he went on after a moment. "What now do you say of this? It drifted in during the night, and was brought me by one of the men a while before you came."

Reaching out, he seized an object that stood in the corner of the room and handed it to me. It was a paddle, long and heavy, and of the sort commonly used by swampers. Upon the handle had been burned with some pointed instrument a rude "B. D."

Moving to the window, I examined the paddle carefully, going over it inch by inch in the morning light. Through its long immersion it had been washed clean of such marks as were not indelible, and its handle and blade yielded nothing to my search. As I raised it, however, and examined the blade's under edge, I was more suc-

cessful. Here, through constant use, the texture of the wood had been worn into a fringe-like half circle of innumerable tiny splinters. Forced into the splinters were several atoms of a pinkish hue. I recognized these atoms at once. Also I found that they were quite fresh.

"Well?" questioned the leader as I returned the paddle. "Have you found anything, Bossu?"

"Yes, M'sieu," I replied. "I have discovered how your nephew rolled into his pirogue without filling it full of water. As you have perhaps heard, the bottom was scarcely covered. For the present I will say no more. When we come to the pirogue itself, I trust that I may be able to make my meaning clearer."

"Then you mean to keep on?" he asked.

"Yes, M'sieu," I returned. "To plead with Fagot is useless. He has forbidden me to speak, and one word will close his cabin to me. Thus I can only do my best to prove Jeanne's innocence in such time as is left to me, and I again ask your assistance in that proof.

"Surely you will not refuse to do what you can in saving the life of this old madman? I do not plead for mercy, M'sieu. It is to your justice that I appeal."

A pause followed during which I endured a suspense that I trust will never be mine again. If the leader refused, the most important of all my evidence would be denied to me. I hoped that I had impressed him by exploding his theory, which must also be the theory of the camp. At best I prayed only for a temporary victory. Upon further consideration I knew that he must inevitably return to his former views. As I waited my nails bit into my palms, as from the bearing of some intense pain.

Then Voltaire Bon spoke in the slow judicial tones of his returned authority.

"*Bien,* Bossu," said he. "I will do what I can."

In an instant I had him out of his chair.

"Come then, M'sieu," I cried. "We will begin with the body and the clothes. Hurry, M'sieu, for already I have wasted much time. For the past hour I should have been upon the trail."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TRAIL

THE leader's cabin, as became his importance, contained three rooms. In the largest of these I found the body of Blaise Duron already laid out for burial. Holy candles burned at the head and feet. The hands, folded across the breast, pressed a crucifix. As we entered Madame Bon knelt at prayer, but at a sign from her husband she silently withdrew.

This part of my investigation I will pass over with a word. It is not pleasant to remember. There was no mark save the wound, and this, through its size and depth, told only its former story of a stroke of great force and power.

Yet I was not discouraged, for I had staked my hopes upon my examination of the clothes.

There, if anywhere, I expected to find what I sought.

Therefore my disappointment may be imagined when Madame Bon produced the garments rough dried from a recent washing. Save for such stubborn bloodstains as had defied the soap and water, they had been cleansed of everything that might have served me.

"Madame, Madame," I cried. "What have you done?"

At once Madame Bon ceased the low sobbing moan through which she had given vent to her feelings. A stout placid woman, she found little difficulty in mastering her grief.

"What have I done?" she echoed tartly. "Can you not see for yourself? Last night my husband gave me these clothes, and told me to put them carefully away, that later they might be used as evidence. Would you have had me send them all stained and draggled before M'sieu the Judge? I washed them at once as best I could, meaning to iron them this morning, and so have

them ready for the officer. Even in the swamp, Bossu, we have our pride."

I made no further remonstrance. She would not have understood.

"And when you washed the clothes, Madame, did you notice any peculiar stains or accumulations of any kind?" I questioned. "Think carefully, if you please. It is most important."

At this she rebuked me sharply.

"Noticed?" she cried. "Would you have me notice such trifles when my nephew lay murdered within the house?"

"The water then, Madame," I continued desperately. "Where did you empty it when you were through?"

The good lady shuddered, closing her eyes as though to shut out some horrid vision.

"Bossu, Bossu," she protested weakly. "How can you ask of such things? When I was through I cast it, bowl and all, from one of the landings. You should have seen it. It was not nice to empty about."

"Pardon, Madame," I apologized. "If I have upset you, it has been only in the interests of justice. One look at the clothes, and I will trouble you no more."

I examined them but, although I exercised the utmost care, I discovered little that I had not guessed before. The lower garments had nothing to offer. The blouse, of a peculiar bluish cottonade, was little more enlightening. Indeed, thanks to Madame Bon's housewifely pride, there was nothing left to draw my attention save the rent in the back, and the buttons along the front.

The rent, ragged and irregular, not only spoke, like the wound, of a powerful blow; it went further and proved that this blow had been struck with a rough-edged instrument. The tough cloth of the blouse had not been parted quickly or cleanly. It had been torn, rather than cut and, from their heavier stain, one could see that the raveled edges of the rent had been forced into the wound. Yet, despite its evident value in respect to a girl's strength of arm, I kept this dis-

covery to myself. Through constant hacking Jeanne's blade had been nicked until it was little better than that of a saw.

With the buttons I was more successful. Originally four in number, they were now reduced to three, the second one from the top having been violently wrenched away. In proof of this wrenching a tiny sliver of bone still adhered to the twist of thread that had held the button in place. Had it not been for the washing, I might have gone further and found the marks left by the clutching fingers. Now the cloth was of that uniform stiffness peculiar to garments that have been rough dried.

"Observe that lost button, M'sieu," I requested, as I handed the blouse to the leader. "It will tell you how your nephew came by the glove."

But Voltaire Bon had followed my reasoning with a most disconcerting thoroughness.

"Or how he struggled blindly to find his wound," he replied.

"As you please, M'sieu," said I with such indifference as I could muster. "Let us now examine the pirogue. Afterward, with your permission, I will ask some questions."

Passing out, we went down to the water from which Duron's pirogue had been removed. It now lay where it had been dragged a short distance up the bank, and about it was gathered a little knot of swampers. Somewhat apart from them Mouret, one of the married men, sat upon a stump, a rifle cradled across his knees. The leader was taking no chances on a sudden escape.

My inspection of the pirogue, upon which I spent considerable time, need not be recounted in detail. Under the silent, yet inquisitive, stare of the swampers I examined the craft to its faintest scratch, taking note of each mark and stain. In the end I made two important discoveries.

The first I came upon at the bow which, on both sides, and for a short distance above the water line, was scraped as from a contact with some rough surface. Searching here, I soon

brought to light many more of the same pinkish atoms that I had discovered upon the end of the paddle. Next, going farther afield, I had little difficulty in detecting numerous other atoms which were scattered about amid the maze of bruises and scratches that decorated the pirogue's outside. These atoms together with the scraping at the bow I pointed out to the leader.

My second discovery was reserved for the end when, having examined the pirogue elsewhere, I turned my attention to its inside. The bottom had been wiped dry of its drippings of blood and water, leaving only a smeared blur of sediment. Scraping carefully at this sediment with my knife, a little forward of the paddler's seat, I uncovered the myriad of small, furrow-like scars left by the nails of Duron's boots. These scars I studied minutely until I finally traced a few that were different from the rest. They were fresher, they were graven more deeply, and they ran in parallel lines. Having shown them also to the leader, I announced that I was through.

"Well?" he inquired, as I arose from my task. "What of your discoveries, Bossu?"

"Before I explain them, I would like to put my questions, M'sieu," I answered. "As they are concerned solely with the events of yesterday and with the swamp, it will be best for all to hear them. Perhaps there are those who may be able to add to your information. But to begin. At what time yesterday did your nephew arrive where you were working?"

The leader considered a moment.

"It was after noon," he replied. "I could not answer to the minute."

"His condition?"

"He was drunk—too drunk, in fact, to be of any use at his calling."

"He had his ax?"

"Yes, at the time of his arrival."

"He wished to work?"

"He suggested it, but I ordered him off. After some words he departed."

"His words?"

"I paid little attention to them. One phrase, however, I remember. '*Bien,* M'sieu,' he shouted. 'Yours is not the only trade.' It was then that he cast his ax into the water."

"In what direction did he depart?"

"When last I saw him he was pushing back into the swamp."

"You saw him no more after that?"

"Not alive."

I took another tack.

"Far back in the swamp many of the trees are covered at their base with a pinkish lichen, are they not, M'sieu?" I inquired.

"They are," he replied.

"This condition prevails to a considerable extent?"

"Only to a certain belt of trees."

"The direction taken by this belt?"

"It extends north and south."

"Its length?"

"A mile, perhaps more."

I ceased, thanking him for his patience.

"You have anything to add to this?" I asked, turning to the men.

They all shook their heads and one, speaking up for the rest, observed—"No, Bossu. You must find out the balance for yourself. As he says, the leader was the last to see Duron alive, and we know little of that belt of pink trees which we call the painted woods. It lies beyond our usual haunts, and is not within easy reach when one goes outside by way of open water."

Thanking him also, I turned away. For the moment there was nothing more to be learned at the camp. There was no use in suspecting the men. The leader would be able to account for every one of them. There remained only the recital of my discoveries to Voltaire Bon, and this I wished to accomplish in private. At my suggestion we returned whence we had come.

"And now out with it, Bossu," cried the leader impatiently, when we were once more seated inside his cabin. "What is it that you think you know?"

"I know three things, M'sieu," I answered. "I can now give you the place where your nephew died, his position before death, and the means by which he tumbled into his pirogue without filling it with water. Also I can set forth at least four reasons which make it impossible for Jeanne to have committed the crime. As to the identity of the real murderer and the exact weapon used, I am still in the dark.

"To begin with, your nephew was killed in what you call the painted woods. You remember those tiny bits of pink lichen? They could have come from nowhere else. That he was killed there, and not upon his way or his return, I know from the manner in which the bits are scattered. Drunk or sober, Blaise Duron was ever an expert with the pirogue. As long as he could wield a paddle he would never have struck the number of trunks and knees that are accounted for by that scattering of pink atoms. The current bumped them after he was dead. I myself made such a journey here, and I know.

"The scars that I showed you inside the pirogue explain your nephew's position before death. He was standing upright, and afterward he fell backward into the water. Consider those scars, M'sieu. They were fresher than the others, and they were many times as deep. Your nephew had no spikes. He wore only his ordinary boots, the blunt nails of which must have been dragged over the bottom with unusual violence and swiftness to have left such marks.

"The scraping at the bow you must already understand. Surely nothing could speak plainer of a pirogue jammed among the knees! It was when he rose to free himself that your nephew died. Those few bits of lichen upon the end of the paddle show that he made the attempt, but death caught him before he could shove clear. That he was still jammed when he fell is explained by those scars in the bottom running parallel to one another. Had the pirogue been unsteadied, the heels would not have dragged evenly upward. They would have slid wildly

sideways and outward, leaving a corresponding mark.

"As for your nephew's return without filling his pirogue with water, I leave that to your imagination. Still firmly held, the craft had no chance to tip. Afterward, freed by the current and the peculiar position of the body, it drifted away."

I paused for effect, but the leader was as ready as ever with his question.

"Then, if, as you say, my nephew was so clever with his pirogue, how did he allow himself to be jammed?" he demanded.

"His attention was distracted for the moment, M'sieu," I countered. "Had he been closer in, and were it not for that absent button of the blouse, I should still stick to my former guess that he had just discovered the glove. At all events, it is most probable that he had a bottle with him. Perhaps, while drinking from it between strokes, he jammed."

At least the leader did not argue the point.

"Proceed," he growled.

"I am through save for my summing up, M'sieu," said I. "I promised you four reasons that would make the commission of the crime by Jeanne impossible. Here they are.

"First, through his upright position, Jeanne could never have come upon your nephew unnoticed. Secondly, once a man of Duron's size and strength was upon his feet, no girl could have found either the time or the chance to make such a wound with such a weapon. Thirdly, even were this possible, the stroke was beyond Jeanne's power. Fourthly, considering her arrival and departure, and the time involved in gathering her moss, Jeanne, with her slow-flat-bottomed boat, could never have penetrated as far as the painted woods. Surely you will agree with me there, M'sieu. Thus, since it was impossible for Jeanne to have reached the scene of the crime, it naturally follows that she could never have committed it."

I had played my trump card, and I awaited

the result in an agony of impatience. This time, however, my suspense was short lived. Interested, impressed, the leader responded at once with his appreciation.

"That is good, Bossu," he approved. "From your standpoint you have worked it all out to the last detail. Keep on as you have started, and you will have a pretty story to tell the jury."

"Then you will give me a chance, M'sieu?" I cried. "You will hold off the sheriff until I have had my try at those painted woods?"

He stared at me in surprise. Understanding my efforts, he had not grasped their immediate purpose.

"Hold him off?" he exclaimed. "Dalbor? Are you mad, Bossu? Even if I wished to it would be impossible. As well try to hold off a hurricane."

"But think of Fagot, M'sieu," I protested.

"That is his affair," he shrugged. "I can do nothing now that the matter is in the hands of the law. Also it will not profit you to go with

your tale to the sheriff. If now you could lay your hands on the one whom you term the real murderer, it might be different. Then, perhaps, Dalbor would be only too willing to turn his activities elsewhere."

"But to do so I must first scour the swamp, M'sieu," I persisted. "Surely, understanding this, you can realize the necessity for time? Surely, as the one in authority, the sheriff will listen to you? Give me but one more day for my work, M'sieu. Think of Fagot, your old friend. Last night you said that you were sorry for him."

Again the leader shrugged. He was thinking his own thoughts now, and his interest, his appreciation, had departed. If I had impressed him, it had not been for long.

"Perhaps there were others demoralized besides yourself last night, Bossu," he returned. "I repeat I can do nothing." Looking toward the door, he added meaningly: "At least you have this afternoon."

Taking the hint, I left him to return swiftly to

Fagot. It was my third defeat, and of the three it was the hardest. To me it was all so clear, so simple. How the leader doubted I could not understand.

At the cabin of the besieged I found all in readiness for the coming assault. To the single window which looked out upon the slope, a mattress had been fastened half-way up. Upon the floor beneath stood a regiment of the special, buckshot shells, flanked by a similar amount of ammunition for my own gun. A second mattress had been nailed to the door of the small back room in which Jeanne was to take refuge during the firing. The kettle now brimmed with water. Upon the table was a quantity of prepared food.

"Well?" demanded Fagot as he let me in. "What luck? At least I am ready. I will make it hot for them out there."

"I have failed," I announced briefly. "There is no time now to explain. The officer is Dalbor, himself, and he is expected by six o'clock.

According to Voltaire Bon I can stop him in only one way. To find this way I must search the swamp. I am off at once, and I will try to be back no later than a quarter to six. Should I be delayed, you must find some way to let me in, even though you are under fire. You understand?"

Fagot returned a surly assent. *"Bien,"* said he. "I can only promise to do my best. Once they begin, it will be every man for himself."

Snatching some food I turned to depart, but before I could hurry outside, Jeanne caught at my arm. "Marcel," she cried. "What of Marcel, Bossu?"

I could only reply with a shake of my head. In the interest of my investigation, I had forgotten all about her request. She also said no word, but the reproach in her eyes was, at that moment, almost more than I could bear.

Poor Jeanne! Her thoughts were not of my failure, but of the man she loved. As I have said, our women are like that.

CHAPTER XXV

NATURE REPAYS

DESPITE all my efforts at haste throughout the morning, it was well after noon when I left the camp. With hard paddling I hoped to reach the painted woods by two o'clock. This would leave me little more than an hour for my search, but it was the best that I could do. I must be back before the sheriff arrived and, through experience, I knew that I must allow myself at least a small margin of time in case of accident.

Making the most of the open water, I entered the swamp and pushed back into it in a straight line. If I kept on I must sooner or later reach the painted woods. My point of entry was, unfortunately, of little consequence. The pink trees

extended for more than a mile, and anywhere among them Duron might have met his death. As well search one spot as another, since I could not search the whole.

Herein lay the difficulty of my undertaking. Had I had a day even, I might hurriedly have explored the belt from one end to the other. An hour was as inadequate as it was tantalizing. I could only trust in that luck which is the last refuge of those in despair. Perhaps I might enter near the required spot. At all events I was doing the one thing possible for Fagot and myself. Had I remained at camp or cabin, the inactivity would have driven me mad.

I pushed back, first past the open spaces cleared by Voltaire Bon and his men, next into the stiff, unbroken ranks of the virgin cypress. Inside it was dreadfully close and still. To my feverish impatience the silence, the immobility of the swamp was exasperating. The trees, stretching away in endless, stately sequence, gave forth not the slightest whisper. Their moss hung limp

and motionless in the moist breathless air. From their mat of branches came not the faintest ripple of foliage.

Back I pushed until the growth grew denser and thicker, and small spots of pink began to mar the uniform brownness of the surrounding trunks. I was nearing my goal now, and with each hurried stroke I realized more fully the folly of my mission. What if I did have the supreme luck to enter near the required spot? Would I be any wiser than I had been before? At best I could only find the knee that had jammed Duron —a mere, gnarled upthrust of wood and lichen, similar, save for its bruises, to any of its countless fellows.

There would be no tracks or marks, of foot or hand, in that wilderness of running water. Even such lost or unnoticed trifles as often identify a crime, would have long since been carried away by the current.

It was the blindest of blind trails, and I had set out upon it, not in search of a clue, but in the

hope of finding the murderer himself. At last I realized that, in escaping from the madness of inaction, I had only run into the far greater madness of absurd and futile effort. Had I stayed at the camp, I would at least have kept Voltaire Bon's appreciation. Now he would laugh at me for a fool.

Utterly hopeless and disheartened, I finally entered the grotesque dimness of the painted woods. Here, save for the lichen, the character of the swamp was unchanged. Yet, had I searched the world over, I could have found no truer setting for the horrors of murder.

The trees, blotched and leprous, stood out with ghastly pallor against the gloom, their trunks splashed by the brush of Nature in all the varied shades of pink and crimson. They were like the ghosts of trees—vague, formless ghosts, that slipped in and out of the shadows as in some weird game of hide-and-seek. And all about, on trunk, and root, and knee, those crimson gouts were spattered, as from all the blood shed since the beginning of time.

My search, to which I braced myself at once, proved even more fruitless than I had feared. Having entered in a straight line from the center of the swamp, I took myself to be also in the center of the belt. Here Duron most probably entered; although afterward he might have followed the belt either to the north or south. Blazing a tree, I staked my choice of direction upon the toss of a coin. It fell south, and a moment later I was upon my way, my eyes taking note of each knee that seemed to offer a chance to trap the unwary.

In less than five minutes I was ready to give up. It was not only the vast, inconceivable number of the knees. It was also the impossibility of identifying, even if found, the ones that I sought. I had only the scrapings left by the jammed pirogue to go upon. Through drifting logs and falling branches, similar scrapings were scattered about on every hand. At the camp I had searched a few definite objects for certain definite marks. Here both objects and marks were as indefinite as they were innumerable.

Yet I kept on throughout my appointed hour. Having arrived, I could only justify my presence there by perseverance.

It was shortly after three o'clock when, having doubled back to my blaze, I set out on my return. I was calm now, with that calmness which acknowledges the worst. Jeanne I might clear in time. Fagot, save for my last desperate course, was beyond my aid. It is no easy task to wrest a shotgun from a blood-crazed madman, however old. Also it is not a pleasant one when the madman happens to be your friend. And Fagot had called me a man. As I thought of what lay before me, I came to know what Judas must have felt.

Sullenly, almost carelessly, I threaded my outward way. Within me burned a dull resentment against the absurdity of my quest. For all the good that it had done me, I might have drifted through the swamp as insensible as when I first arrived. I recalled that vague, tortured journey, with its brief flashes of consciousness. I pic-

tured the sweet face of Jeanne, peering down at me through my mist of pain. It was curious, I thought, how the events of the past few weeks had worked back upon themselves. First had come the snake, then the hopelessness of the swamp, then Jeanne, the race, the duel, the murder, and now the hopelessness of the swamp again. It needed only the snake to complete the circle.

Then, roused from my abstraction by the bump of a root, I glanced up and saw him. He was a huge, rusty moccasin—almost the counterpart of my former assailant—and he lay coiled about a near-by knee. His flat cruel head was pointed away from me and one coil, caught by a protuberance, was lifted higher than the rest.

It was that upraised coil which decided me. Otherwise, despite my hatred of his kind, I would never have wasted the time required to stalk him. But the call of his humped scaly thickness was irresistible. Breathless, wary, I approached until my paddle flashed down in its blow.

The blow, hard and true, was helped by the sharpness of the knee. The protuberance, struck fairly, was driven clear through the moccasin, impaling him. An instant I watched his struggles as he strove to writhe himself into the water. Then, as I gazed at the ragged sliver of cypress thrust through the snake's broken back, the idea came to me.

It was a ridiculously simple idea. Indeed, even as I grasped it, I marveled that I had not arrived at it long before as the one logical outcome of my investigations. Now I saw that through my frantic haste and anxiety, I had been blinded to the very obvious meaning of what I had discovered at the camp.

It had remained for Nature, wearying of my stupidity, to open my eyes. If before she had sought to destroy me, she now repaid in full with a brief flash of understanding. No longer did I struggle with a theory—I knew. The trail was open. Fagot was saved. I had vindicated the maddest of quests.

I did not put back to confirm this new discovery. I was sure, and the matter could wait. With what I now had to tell him, Voltaire Bon could scarce refuse the delay necessary for a complete investigation.

Still forward I pushed in eager triumph, and as I went I became gradually conscious of a far-off peculiar sound. First heard it was like the dripping of distant water. Next it seemed a dry methodical crackle, as from the regular snapping of twigs. Later, as it approached nearer, the sound declared itself and became a series of faint but unmistakable explosions.

It was a launch, and her business out there upon the open water was only too easily explained. Ledet, through the presence of some trader at Bayou Jules, had stolen a march on me. Having exchanged paddle for propeller, he was arriving with the sheriff a good two hours before the expected time.

It was the last blow of a treacherous Fate, yet I faced it determinedly. After what I had dis-

covered defeat was impossible, I told myself. Now that I knew, I could not, would not, let them beat me.

One swift glance, and I had determined my exact situation. I was but half-way out, and already the mocking sounds of the launch had died away in the distance. Before me lay an ordinary journey of some three-quarters of an hour. I would simply have to make it an extraordinary journey, that was all. Defiantly aglow, as at some voiceless challenge, I bent to my task. When I bit into the water it was with the fierce yet measured stroke of one who spurns a starting line.

Of the next thirty minutes I have only a confused recollection as of an endless period of suspense and pain. Starting at top speed, I never for a moment relaxed the swiftness of my stroke. I did not think of the folly, the danger, of such a course. My thoughts, like the bow of my pirogue, raced on ahead of me. "Would I arrive in time, would I arrive in time?" That was the

question that droned in my ears to the dip of my flying paddle.

How I cleared that swamp without disaster I have never known. God, Himself, must have directed my path. Sharp fangs of root and knee snapped at me from every side, yet always I managed to evade them.

It was not until I had made the clearings, that my thoughts were dragged back from the goal ahead to the ever-increasing torture of my body. By now there pulsed through my back and arms, a flood as of living fire. My eyes were half blinded with sweat and strain, while my hands, calloused by the toil of years, were beginning to puff into a torment of hard leathery blisters. Each moment it seemed that I must slow down, yet always I found the endurance for another stroke.

It was no longer a race against death. It had developed into something beyond that. It was more like the piling of infinite, agonized movements into a pinnacle of supreme endeavor.

Past the clearings, through the last outer fringe of trees I sped, my head still bowed to my work. It was no use to look up, now that I was upon open water, and in sight of the camp. The hot glare of the afternoon sun would only strike into my half-closed eyes, blinding them completely. Success or failure lay in view, yet the sight of it was denied me. I must clear the last tortured yard of that dreadful course before my efforts would be rewarded. Dogged yet hopeful, I tore away at the water. At least no shot had sounded.

I have often regretted that none were there to mark my passage from swamp to landings. Perhaps it was worthy of Voltaire Bon's silver token. I can not say. At all events I arrived with a churn of white foam beneath my bow, and, dashing the sweat from my eyes, looked up in the welcome shadow.

At first glance the camp appeared deserted. Landings and cabin were bereft of a human soul. Save for the launch, I caught no evidence of what I feared.

Then, searching the slope, I saw, just below Fagot's cabin, a ragged half-circle of crouching figures. From this half-circle the sunlight struck a hard glint, as of steel, and slightly in advance of it, yet another figure stooped alone. Even as I gazed this figure raised a hand, and the half-circle began to close in.

Such strength as remained to me I put into my voice.

"Hold, hold, M'sieu Dalbor," I shouted. "You are about to shed innocent blood. Out there, in the swamp, I have discovered the real murderer."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PROOF

SHERIFF Dalbor was as cautious as he was determined. At my shout he halted his men, but he did not allow them to break their formation. Also, before coming forward to interview me, he beckoned a figure from the ranks into his place—the rugged bearded figure of Voltaire Bon. This much I caught as I scrambled from my pirogue and ran up one of the landings.

The sheriff met me upon the shore. He was a short, heavy, red-faced man, not stout but sturdy, and his general appearance gave one the impression of a slow good-humor. Here, I told myself, was one not easily to be reckoned with. In the more serious matters of life a smile is far harder to defeat than a scowl.

"M'sieu Dalbor?" I questioned.

He nodded, at the same time glancing back toward his men.

"I am Jean Le Bossu," I told him.

At my words the sheriff's manner changed completely. In a flash the smile that I had looked for appeared, wrinkling up his face into innumerable tiny lines. It was a smile of friendliness and good will. I made haste to seize his outstretched hand.

"So you are indeed Jean Le Bossu?" he greeted me. "Believe me, I have long wanted to meet you. When I tell you that your friend, Pierre Larue, is my own first cousin, you will perhaps understand."

Here was luck wholly unexpected. Some time before I had helped Pierre Larue in the matter of a box of goldpieces hidden by a miser uncle in the swamp. And now the deed was bearing good fruit.

Taking advantage of the sheriff's mood, I quickly informed him of my search, and of my

final discovery. When I was through his broad ruddy face was wrinkled again—this time with lines of uncertainty.

"I am sorry, my friend," said he slowly. "What you say sounds very well but, after all, it is only a theory. Arrest comes first, theories afterward. I should never have left my posse. When you called to me just now, you declared that you had found this fantastic murderer of yours."

"And so I have, M'sieu," I insisted. "As for the laying of my hands upon the criminal, that should prove no difficult task. Already I have covered a part of the painted woods. In addition I now have a definite and peculiar object to search for. It will take little time."

At this he showed a faint revival of interest.

"Perhaps so," he admitted. "But there is my duty. I can not let the sun go down with my prisoner cornered. yet uncaptured."

"It still lacks several hours to sunset, M'sieu," I pointed out to him. "Also you have your

launch in which to cross quickly to the swamp. Give me this time, and the assistance of a second pirogue, and I will ask no more. Just now you expressed an appreciation of my service to your cousin. Would you have me desert this other friend of mine in a moment of far greater necessity?"

The sheriff thought a while, considering his line of attack. Then he turned to me with a nod of acceptance.

"*Bien,* Bossu," said he familiarly. "You shall have your chance. This is an ugly job at best. Choose a helper, and I will take Voltaire Bon who, of all men, should be the best fitted to pass upon your discovery. The others I will leave here on guard under the command of this Ledet of yours. He is a good man, Ledet. Some day you will find him in charge here."

My thanks were as brief as they were earnest. Each moment now was of inestimable value. Choosing Trappey as my assistant, I made, before the sheriff hurried off, a final request. This

was that he would not disclose the exact identity of the murderer to Voltaire Bon.

M'sieu Dalbor's smile of agreement suggested that I meant to make the most of my expected triumph. I could, however, have offered him a far more practical reason for my petition. Should the leader be informed beforehand, I knew that he would argue himself into that state of skepticism which contends that seeing is not necessarily believing.

Thus the matter was arranged, and ten minutes later we were in the launch, and headed for the swamp at a speed that dragged the pirogues, towed behind, half out of the water. At the edge of the trees we entered these pirogues, Trappey and the sheriff going in one, Voltaire Bon and myself in the other. Thus far the leader had endured his ignorance with an air of sullen resentment. Now, as the shadows closed around him, he became acutely suspicious. All the way to the painted woods he kept the sharp lookout of one who expects some sudden trick.

With the first pale scatter of lichen I quickened my stroke which, strive as I might, had flagged woefully. Forgetful now of ache of arm or sting of blister, I set a pace that soon brought us to the blaze at my former point of entry. Here, having headed Trappey north upon the outside of the belt, I set out along its inner edge, taking the same direction.

The leader, savagely dumb, asked no questions, nor even then did I relieve his curiosity. True, his keen well-trained vision would have aided me much in my quest, but I meant to keep him from his thoughts until the last moment. Through him it might be necessary to convince the sheriff, and I did not intend to lose any of the advantage that might be gained by the shock of sudden enlightenment.

Therefore, trusting to myself for the inner edge, I again took the trail amid that wan huddle of painted trunks, my eyes once more scanning the floor of the swamp as I slipped along. This time, despite the vast scattered growth, my task

was comparatively easy. Where scrapings and bruises had abounded, the condition that I now sought was exceedingly rare. Thus I was enabled to work both swiftly and thoroughly. Indeed, my one fear was that the light would not last out my search. Already the swamp had become very dim and obscure, and the shadows were fast deepening into night.

Five minutes, ten minutes, sped unsuccessfully. Five minutes more, and the hope in my heart had changed to anxiety. Another quarter of an hour, and I had lost the last vestige of my new-born confidence. And then, just as the dark mocking face of despair peered out at me from the thickening gloom, there came a sudden hail.

I have sometimes thought it unfair that, after all my stress and struggle, Trappey should have been the one to find it. And yet, having discovered the crime, it was, perhaps, only consistent that he should now detect its author. At all events there was only relief in my answering

shout, a relief so patent that it broke down the sullen barriers of the leader's reserve.

"Bossu, Bossu?" he cried as we shot forward. "They have found him?"

I waited until we had swung alongside.

"They have found *it,* M'sieu," I corrected. "Behold now the murderer of your nephew."

It was only a blasted knee, and the bolt that had shattered it had also riven the parent trunk into a tangle of splintered limbs and branches. This tangle, hanging low, cast a dense shadow just beyond the knee, blotting out the difficulties of the way ahead. Nature, calling the lightning to her aid, had set a skilful trap. Poor, drunken Duron had proved an easy victim.

For a space we four stared silently—mute with the horror of our find. There was something unspeakably wanton and repellent about that jagged length of cypress, thrust starkly up from the dark waters of the swamp. One felt that, now that its work was finished, it should at least have had the decency to withdraw itself into the

foul depths from which it had sprung. It was as though Nature, not satisfied with her toll of a human life, was brandishing her naked weapon in the face of mankind.

As for this weapon, it could not have been fashioned more cunningly to its purpose. Broad, long, rough-edged and firmly pointed, it combined the cut of a knife with the thrust of a spear. So stout was it that, save for its blood-stains, it bore few marks of its recent dreadful employment. Here and there hung a broken sliver. The original bristle of fine filaments peculiar to shattered bark and wood had been smoothed away. At first I could discover nothing else.

Then, peering closer, I saw something that had been obscured by distance. This was that, of the knee's jagged edges, one was marred for half its length by the faint irregular thread of a crack. Searching downward along this crack, I discovered at its lowest point of division, a tiny spot of a shade far darker than the surrounding blood-stain.

At once I straightened up. I was through, and in a manner beyond my wildest hopes.

The sheriff was the first to speak. He was no woodsman and, save for the knee, those evidences of a devilish ingenuity so plain to the rest of us, were wholly lost on him.

"Well, Bossu," he questioned, "is this what you have been looking for? If so, what have you to say for yourself?"

"Only this, M'sieu," I replied. "At some unknown hour yesterday afternoon Blaise Duron, in drifting about the swamp, approached this spot. He was drunk, and careless, and he did not pick his way. Running blindly into the shadow cast by that low-hanging tangle of branches, he jammed his pirogue. If you look, you will see the marks upon the knees.

"Next, rising to his feet, Duron sought to push himself free with his paddle. The pirogue was jammed tightly. Duron pushed with all his might. Suddenly his unsteady feet slipped from under him, and he fell backward and outward

with all the force of his great weight. That sharpened knee there, was waiting to receive him.

"Afterward, freeing himself in some manner from his terrible impalement, he managed for one agonized instant to regain his feet. As he fell again, this time forward, and in the direction of the pirogue, his body was caught and supported by the edge of the craft. How he managed to wriggle inside with that ghastly wound in his back, God alone knows. That he did so has been proved by his position when found.

"Of this much I am convinced and, if you will observe how I have placed my pirogue, you will see that, dying as he was, Duron could scarce have regained his craft in any other manner. Through his struggles to roll inside, the pirogue was released. The current did the rest.

"So that is all, M'sieu, and, as I prophesied to you at the camp, our search has been neither long nor difficult. Being squat and stout, these knees are impervious to all ordinary blows. I knew that I would have few shattered ones to choose from."

I paused, and the sheriff turned to Voltaire Bon. "And what have you to say to all this, M'sieu?" he questioned.

Before replying, the leader raised a hand to the scatter of cold perspiration which, during my recital, had broken out upon his brow.

"I say that this is devil's work," he answered hoarsely. "Nevertheless, there is a ring of truth to Bossu's words."

Drawing my knife, I again bent to the knee. Then, forcing open the crack in its edge, I pried carefully at the dark spot that I had discovered, until it fell into my waiting hand. It was, as I knew, a tiny fragment torn from Duron's blouse; and the crack, holding it close, had preserved its identity. Save where its outer fringe had come in contact with the blood, it was wholly unstained. There was no denying that minute bit of cottonade, with its peculiar bluish hue. It was the ultimate proof. As I held it out to the leader, I felt a pang of regret at the unnecessary strain that I had put upon his forbearance.

"And how do my words ring now, M'sieu?" I inquired.

One swift look Voltaire Bon cast upon the fragment. Then, catching an ax from the bottom of the pirogue, he sprang out into the shallow water. Twice he swung, with the skill of years, and at the second stroke the destruction of the knee was made complete. And then, as the stained evil thing wallowed harmlessly away upon the oily current, the leader answered, his tone now one of absolute conviction.

"Your words ring as true as my blade, Bossu."

The sheriff signed to Trappey. Convinced without the fragment, he had only awaited this verdict.

"Come then," he ordered briskly. "Let us get out of this, and at once. Our duty is now to the living, not the dead."

"Yes," agreed Voltaire Bon. "They have suffered much, Jeanne and Fagot." And he added to himself as he seized his paddle— "I can only try to make it up to them in the years to come."

So we hurried away from that accursed spot, never ceasing dip or stroke until we had arrived at the edge of the trees. Again the leader made the journey in silence, but once, as we slowed down to encircle a fallen trunk, I felt the touch of his hand upon my shoulder.

That was all, yet it was enough. Coming from Voltaire Bon, it meant far more than any spoken praise.

CHAPTER XXVII

SUNSET

THANKS to M'sieu Dalbor's thoughtfulness, the siege of the cabin was raised some time before our arrival at the camp. Indeed, scarce had he gained foothold upon the launch before, drawing his revolver, the sheriff fired three rapid shots. It was a signal of success arranged with Ledet, and when shortly after we swung in to the landings, the grim half-circle had resolved itself into an impatient cluster of curious men.

We landed amid an excitement that is spoken of in the swamp to this day. Shouted questions blended with shouted answers into a mighty uproar of sound—an uproar whose dominant note was one of relief. As the sheriff had said, it had been an ugly job, and these rough but kind-

hearted swampers were only too pleased at being freed from their responsibility.

"*Dieu,* M'sieu Dalbor," cried honest Ledet, his voice still trembling from his recent ordeal. "That third shot of yours seemed an hour in coming. This man hunting may be all right, but not when your prey is a lame old father."

With his words relief changed to sympathy—the quick generous sympathy which marks the brotherhood of the wild. "Fagot, Fagot!" rose the cry. Then, as I hurried away with my glad tidings, the men, led by Voltaire Bon, swarmed up the slope behind me.

At the cabin I found Fagot alone and unarmed upon his little front porch. Ledet had shouted to him after receiving the sheriff's signal, and he had only waited to make sure that it was no trick before showing himself. There were tears in his eyes as I sprang up the steps and, although his lips moved, his big voice was unable to utter a sound. As I gazed at him it was as though the menace of the past day and night had never

been. His trouble over, the old man had relapsed quite naturally into the kindly gentle creature that I had always known.

And yet, when, after my words of explanation and cheer, the others flocked about him, he bore himself with an air of quiet dignity and self-justification that would not have sat ill upon the leader himself.

"Welcome, my friends, since you come in friendship," his attitude said. "I am glad that all has turned out well, but I do not regret my action. Should the necessity arise, I would do the same again."

So, leaving Fagot to the congratulations of the camp, I went inside in search of Jeanne. The square front room was deserted, and when—having removed its protecting mattress—I entered the little refuge in the rear, I found it untenanted also. But the open window with its hastily demolished barricade had its story to tell, and slipping through it, I hurried away to the cabin of the unmarried men.

At the sick room I found that I had not erred,

and that Jeanne, upon her father's first call of deliverance, has hastened to her injured lover. She sat now in her old place beside the bunk, flashing about at my entrance to stay me.

"Quiet, quiet, Bossu," she warned. "He has but this moment fallen asleep."

"He is conscious, then?" I asked.

"He is saved," she breathed joyously. "His eyes were open when I came in and, as I bent over him, he spoke my name. And they had left him alone. Think of it, Bossu. I was not a moment too soon." She paused, rising to her feet, and as she came toward me her arms were opened wide. "Ah, Bossu, I am so happy, happy," she murmured. "And what can I say to you to whom I owe it all?"

But I, foregoing the beauty of my reward, led her back whence she had come. True, I knew little of a maiden's heart, but there were some things that I could understand.

"Later, Jeanne," I whispered. "This is your hour, and it will never come to you again. Let it, at least, be unshadowed by the past."

Then I left her with her lover, but somehow I could not return to the excitement and confusion of the cabin above. Instead I seated myself upon the short flight of steps in front, gazing out over the water to where the last crimson glory of the sunset was fading from the western sky. And as I gazed it seemed that I could read in the brief pageant of the approaching night, the story of the past, and of what was to come.

For a space the horizon glowed blood red above the line of the trees,—that dark sinister line which marked the horror of the painted woods. Then red paled to gold, gold to gray, and suddenly the swamp became as vague and remote as some land of dreams, in the hush of the twilight.

And then, flashing out upon the grayness, there came the soft twinkling light of a star. High it swung in the infinite spaces overhead, and its tiny lamp burned brightly, like some beacon of peace, above the vast stretch of the sleeping cypress.

CHAPTER XXVIII

OUTSIDE

ONCE conscious, Var recovered quickly. Save for the healing of his wound, it was now only a matter of getting back his strength again. And this he did in the shortest time—as who would not with such a girl as Jeanne waiting for him?

The morning after my search of the swamp he sent for me, smiling Jeanne from the room after I had come inside. When he spoke it was with the slow uncertainty of one who, having much to say, is doubtful of the power of his words.

"Bossu," he began, "back there, on the bayou, I did you a small service. In return you have done me a great one—the greatest of all. What can I say to you?"

"You have said it," I replied. "Already my eyes have told me far more than my ears could ever learn. For the rest, do I not also owe my life to Jeanne? Your happiness is mine. It will be something to think of in the days to come."

"As you wish," said he. "I see that you know. What more can I ask? And now for this business of the hearing. Jeanne has told me some, but not all. I must know where I stand, Bossu."

Going back to that night of disaster, I told him; picturing Jeanne's proud defiance, Duron's drunken bullying, the swift futile rage of Voltaire Bon. When I had finished, Var lay for a while in silence. Yet the look in his eyes went far to explain the slow clenching and unclenching of his hands.

"*Dieu!*" he muttered finally. "And to think that, all the time, I lay here unknowing and helpless. Yet perhaps it was for the best. It is over, Bossu, all of it. I have spoken of it for the last time."

"That is right," I agreed. "The past is done. As for the future—"

But the future was a matter that could not well be discussed without Jeanne. And, once she had been called in, it became quickly apparent that, of all times, the present mattered most of all. So I slipped away, giving them that relief which, under such circumstances, is like the withdrawal of a multitude.

In the days that followed the affairs of the two were fully arranged. Var, upon the recovery of his strength, would go back to his work again. This, however, he would not do under the direction of Voltaire Bon. He and Jeanne were about to start a new life, and they wished to begin it as far away as possible from those scenes that would remind them of the past.

As a youth Var had worked in one of the big cypress mills until, through sheer restlessness, he had exchanged the whine of the saw for the ring of the ax. Now that he had settled down, he meant to return to his former employment. The wages were good, and there was always a chance for promotion. He might become a foreman some day.

Also, in the cottages built by the cypress company, there would always be room for Fagot. They were snug, those cottages. Their trim little porches seemed built for the convenience of tired old men who wished to dream in the sunlight.

True to his words, Var said nothing of that encounter in the swamp. That he told Jeanne I am sure, but the inquiries of the others earned only a blank silence. Some men might have replied by pointing out that it is not nice to speak unkindly of the dead. Var was not one of them.

Yet his forbearance did not pass unnoticed when, upon the morning of his departure, Voltaire Bon bade him farewell in the presence of the assembled camp. It was at sunrise, and Var and Jeanne were about to set forth for Bayou Jules. There the curé would marry them, and afterward they would paddle by easy stages to the cypress mills. Fagot was to remain a while in my charge, that he might arrange his affairs, and give the two a chance to settle themselves.

I will never forget that parting at dawn. The little camp shone fresh and clean in its bath of dew, and out upon the open water the mist clouds rolled and billowed like great fleecy mountains of carded wool. The sky smiled pure and flawless, and the birds sang as at the promise of spring.

True, Nature was only arousing herself for the business of another day, but to this particular awakening she seemed to bring an added charm. It was as though the whole swamp was calling—"God speed you."

The two stood beside their laden pirogue, Var very upright and manly, Jeanne all flushed and rosy with the most beautiful shyness that I have ever seen. The camp-folk passed before them in farewell, the men with a grip and a word, the women with a kiss for the girl, and a brief whisper of parting or advice. Then, last of all, came Voltaire Bon who, stooping, saluted Jeanne upon the brow. To Var he gave his hand, and when he spoke it was in a voice that all could hear.

"Good-by and good luck, Marcel," said he. "Once, when you knew nothing, I did you a wrong. Now, although you know all, you do not complain. You are a man, Marcel, and should you ever tire of the mills, you will find a welcome here."

It was a brave deed—the bravest perhaps in all the leader's long career—and it did not go unrewarded. A low growl of approval came from the men, and when a little later they cheered the departing couple, their voices held a ring of that confidence which is born of faith restored.

Thus Jeanne left the swamp and, as she slipped from the shore into the morning, its tumbled whiteness was suddenly shot with the first rays of the rising sun. An instant they struggled against the twisting vapor, lighting the girl's last backward glance as with some wonderful golden promise. Then the whirling clouds closed down again, and the pirogue was gone—outside.

THE END